

Why Internship Matters: Sociological Reflections From The Field

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Experiential learning is the process of learning by action- by 'doing', which is very important in experiencing the world beyond classroom teaching. This article is a reflective note on an internship experience and explains the importance of student's action in the field. The article highlights the importance of experiential learning in bridging the gap between theories and practice and how field experiences would help students grow not only as academicians but also at a personal level. Through reflection, the article underlies the significance of incorporating experiential learning through internships in sociology curriculum in universities.
	Keywords: experiential learning, internship, sociology, experiences, reflection

Introduction

As a part of the fulfillment of a Masters Degree in Applied Sociology in 2019, we are required to do a compulsory internship during our summer break by the Department. An internship which started off as a compulsion turned out to be one of the most enriching life experiences and the biggest milestone in my postgraduate studies. It also opened up an opportunity to experience a real life work environment and it gave us a chance to meet people with different areas of expertise and different cultural backgrounds who make up the work space. The nature of the internship is community based so the most important take back is how we can link theories to practice in sociology and how we can give back to the community. In addition to this, we had an overnight field visit to *Yelachammanahalli* village which is located in Hosakote Tehsil of Bangalore Rural district in Karnataka, India. This was part of an experiential learning process for a paper on Qualitative Research Methodology where we had Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises of the village. These really got me thinking about the necessity of experiential learning in the field of sociology, which is predominantly thought to be pure research based rather than application based research like social work. This article is a reflective piece about my field experience as a young postgraduate student venturing beyond texts, literature and four walls of a classroom.

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential Learning has increasingly become important in university context and can be reflected in the incorporation of internships and service learning as mandatory courses in universities. Experiential learning, sometimes called situational learning, is 'the incorporation of active, participatory learning opportunities in the course' (Hawtre, 2007, p.144). Experiential learning is based on the work of 20th century scholars like John Dewey, Paolo Friere, David Kolb and others. John Dewey (1938) expressed that learning should not be done in isolation; rather there should be experience in education and it should be contextual. He argues education as a continuous 'reconstruction of experience' and this experience should prepare someone to 'grow' and attain a 'more expansive quality' (Dewey, 1938, p.47). Looking at the relationship between learning and experience, he states-

To 'learn from experience' is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction -discovery of the connection of things (Dewey, 1916, p.140)

Clearly, when we relate this to theories and practice, experience becomes theory and theory is in turn experienced. Experience and learning is in turn, connected to reflection, which when cultivated becomes

thinking, a process of inquiry and investigation. Finally, the conclusion of thinking becomes knowledge (Dewey, 1938). Thus experience and experiential learning becomes crucial in the production of knowledge. Paolo Freire (1970) further critiques the concept of banking education, which is believed to be the pillar of oppressive social order. He argues education should incorporate both action and reflection which will further give students critical consciousness on 'intervening in reality as makers and transformers of the world' (Freire, 1970, p.54). Psychologist David Kolb (1984) came up with a four part cycle of experiential learning involving concrete experience, reflective experience, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, which he believes to foster transformative, effective learning. Central to this model is learning as 'a process rather than outcome' (p.37) and learning as 'a continuous process grounded in experience' (p.38). Janet Eyler (2009) further argues feedback and reflection to be the most crucial factor in achieving a powerful outcome in learning. This feedback and reflection should be a continuous and iterative process 'before, during and after field experiences' (p.30) as well as in classrooms. Assessing three cases of experiential learning in three universities, Hickcox (2002) highlights the importance of faculty in guiding and directing students in developing skills to be dynamic learners in the field. DiYanni and Borst (2020) divided experiential learning into six types- apprenticeships, clinical experiences, fieldwork, internships, research and service learning. Experiential learning focuses on real life situations and the action of 'doing' in a humanistic way. Hence not only is it helpful as a learning process but it also helps connect students in the wider context of society.

Choosing the Field

According to the course description from the university, students are expected to choose an institution of their choice with the objective of getting first hand exposure to the field and to apply theoretical knowledge under practical conditions. The main aim of the course is to enhance the learning process and advance career goals. So, as a curious postgraduate student, I wanted to try out lots of fields and it was difficult to choose from so many options. Community service through working with minority groups in society is what I have always been interested in. I had previously done an internship with SHALOM (Society for HIV/AIDS and Lifeline Operation in Mizoram), a social service organization working towards HIV/AIDS prevention and care programs, during my years as an undergraduate student in university. I wanted to work in the area of community development, branching out to other fields and that was when I found NorthEast Initiative Development Agency (NEIDA). After thorough research on the organization and talking with former interns, I applied for an internship and luckily got accepted despite a few problems with documents. The Human Resource department was extremely helpful and accommodating regarding the issue. Upon learning that the organization mainly focuses on rural development, I wanted to have firsthand experience regarding rural problems and I felt that the organization could help me in providing insight into this. Coming from a city and spending my entire life in a city, from Aizawl to Bangalore, I had never experienced rural problems. My only experience outside the city were small towns in Mizoram and field visits during my undergraduate and previous semester (from introduction-Yelachammanahalli village), which did not go beyond two days. I specifically wanted to learn about rural problems and development in Mizoram since I am a *Mizo* and I would like to show my love and commitment to the development of the state (and ultimately the nation) by working with rural communities in the future. Besides this, since NEIDA is a TATA Trust and it is a private organization, I also wanted to explore an organization set up and look into the work environment and work culture of a private organization that solely looks at development. We had papers on Sociological Theories, Gender, Research methods, Organizational Behavior, Social Psychology, Public Relations and others hence incorporating theories from texts to practice was also something I really looked ahead.

Organization Profile

NorthEast Initiative Development Agency (NEIDA) is a nodal agency for North East Initiative (NEI) by the TATA Trusts. It was first established in Kohima, Nagaland in 2012 and it has now spread its offices in two other North East states namely Mizoram (Aizawl) and Arunachal Pradesh (Papumpare). Now, it is working in all North East Indian states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura towards rural development. The core focus of NEIDA is towards enhancing livelihood opportunities and improving the quality of lives of households it works with through improved agriculture and horticulture practices, promotion of livestock activities, providing access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, sustainable use of natural resources and dissemination of knowledge and expertise on a range of issues. NEIDA has different areas of work including Livestock, Agriculture and Horticulture, Sports and Safe Drinking Water Promotion in Mizoram. There are a total of 37 employees in Mizoram including Aizawl, Serchhip, Lunglei, Champhai and Kolasib district. In the head office that is in Aizawl there are 25 employees (including Education). These employees are divided into the above different areas of work based on their expertise.

In the office, there is an autonomous body which deals with Education and is working in close collaboration with Mizoram University and TATA Institute of Social Science (TISS). Although they occupy the same space as the rest of the department in NEIDA and are also associated with TATA Trusts, they act as an independent body.

In Mizoram, the Livestock Department mainly focuses on the Piggery Project for smallholder pig farmers. This department is one of the most successful departments in the organization. Since pork is a delicacy in the mizo community, almost every household in villages rear pigs. I was told that initially, they provided piglets but this

did not succeed in the long run since people would sell the piglets in the market. To improve the socio-economic status of the villagers, they were given high quality and healthy pig feed so that the pigs can be fattened for slaughter, assist them in pig rearing, in building a pigsty in order for the pig to live a healthy life, etc. They provided free clinics and treatments for animals in the villages as well. Their focus is on awareness and sensitization. There are two veterinary doctors in the organization for this purpose.

In the agriculture and horticulture department, there are three agricultural experts- two in Aizawl office and one in Serchhip district. Along with this, there are also social workers in the office who go for field visits and communicate with the farmers along with the agriculture experts. Their main focus is on land use and rejuvenation. The crops being cultivated with the farmers during the course of the internship were mainly maize, orange and papaya. In collaboration with the Department of Horticulture, Government of Mizoram, a pilot project of dragon fruit cultivation was started in 2017. One of the most important focuses was the implementation of Nitrogen Fixing Tree (NFT) to prevent soil erosion. Implementation of water harvesting and dripping irrigation also stands out.

The Sports Department consists of the football and badminton department. Structured football and badminton training is provided to children to hone their skills so that they can compete at the national and international level. The Football Department works in Grassroot Football Promotion. The football training which was initially taken up by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) which was an after school programme is taken up by NEIDA. Hence they work in collaboration with SSA, Mizoram Football Association and Aizawl Football Club. Children between the age group of 6-14 years are trained. So the department focuses on promotion of women football, coaching education, referee development and volunteer development programme. It spread to 6 districts (excluding Lawngtlai and Siaha district) with 10 centers and 3005 children in total. There was 10% girl participation in each center.

The Badminton department started in 2018. The Tata Trusts work in collaboration with Pullela Gopichand Badminton Foundation (PGBF), Mizoram Badminton Association (MBA) and Mizoram State Sports Council (MSSC) for a programme called the Badminton Initiative. This is a three-tier pyramid system consisting of Grassroot Centres, Regional Development Centres (RDCs) and a state-of-the-art High Altitude Training Centre (HATC) which spreads across the state to nurture talent at all levels. The Grassroot Programme is spread across all eight districts of Mizoram between the age group 8-14 years while the RDCs are spread across six districts (excluding Lawngtlai and Siaha district). Here, the children experience more intensive training. Lastly, at the top, is the HATC. Here, the children will be given professional training from national and international coaches and they will be provided quality education. A high altitude center which is 1400 meters above the sea level is under construction at Sihphir for this purpose.

Although the safe drinking water in itself is not a department yet, it is expected to be soon since it is working at a huge scale. They work in collaboration with the Public Health Engineering Department (PHE) and the Mizoram State Rural Livelihood Mission (MzSRLM). They provide safe and affordable drinking water through TATA Swach Water Purifiers. The main aim is awareness and demand generation. They work in close collaboration with the local groups, especially Women groups in villages.

The organization also consists of the Human Resource Department which caters to the grievances of the employee, handle employee relations, coordinate administration, etc. Additionally, the organization also consists of the Accounts department which manages the finances of the organization.

When it comes to partners, in Aizawl, NEIDA has the following partners-

- Centre for Environmental Protection (CEP)
- Centre for Community Development through Network (CCDN)
- Centre for Peace and Development (CPD)
- Goodwill Foundation (GF)
- Open Doors (OD)

NEIDA also receives support from NABARD and works in collaboration with various government department lines.

In the organization, there are three types of employee-

1. A consultant which is the starting job which usually lasts for six months.
 2. Fixed Term Contract (FTC)
 3. Permanent Staff. As of now, there are 10 permanent staff in the office (excluding Education)
- For permanent staff, there are pension schemes, medical claims and increments up to 25%. The average increment is 8% and the minimum is 5%. The outstanding staff usually receives 15%. There is also a performance appraisal from HR. Additionally, paternity and maternity leave for both men and women is provided.

Objectives pre Internship

We were asked by our faculty to list out our objectives before joining as an intern the following was what i had in mind before going to the field-

1. To look into the kind of relationship between the rural people and the employees who go for field work in the villages
2. To look at how far the projects of NEIDA is helping the rural people in terms of development through direct fieldwork

3. To have an insight into working experience in an organizational setting
4. To understand how different people with diverse backgrounds interact and work together as a group

Expected Outcome

After communicating with the HR Department before joining, the work that they had done sounded very promising. It was very exciting to be part of different projects which catered to rural development and upliftment. I had high expectations from the internship as a student of sociology as well as being a member of the Mizo community since development is still lacking in the state. Since it is a TATA Trust, I had high expectations of the organization in terms of its work setting and work environment. I expected to learn a lot about organizational behavior in the office setting.

Internship: Nature of work

Over the 5 weeks of my internship, my sole focus was with the Safe Drinking Water Programme, Agriculture department and the Badminton department. I was also responsible for writing reports for the field works for the village visits. The Assisting Diversion Based Irrigation (DBI) project was an upcoming project by NEIDA in helping the farmers with regards to a more efficient irrigation system. So, I assisted the engineer and the agriculture department with the project proposal.

The following is a brief of the nature of work done by me in the organization during my internship -

- Field work
 1. Safe and affordable drinking water promotion and awareness via the delivery of TATA Swach Water Purifier
 2. Distribution of pesticides due to the outbreak of fall armyworm
 3. Overseeing badminton training session with supervisors
- Fields visited - *Mamit, Nalzawl, Kawrtethawveng, Serhmun, Thiak, North Lungpher, Sihfa* (villages) and Chanmari West, Bethlehem (localities in the city of Aizawl)
- Report writing
- Assisting Diversion Based Irrigation (DBI) project proposal
- Planning and attending the inauguration of the Regional Development Centre (Badminton Initiative)

Besides this, I along with five other representatives from NEIDA met the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of *Mamit* District to discuss the project proposal for the development of the district. Since the approval of the district collector is required by the CSR partner, the project proposal concept note along with an executive summary was provided to the Deputy Commissioner. There were two meetings. The first meeting was an overview of the Fostering Climate Resilient Upland Farming Systems In The NorthEast (FOCUS) project in Mizoram. We were invited by the Deputy Commissioner to attend this meeting since NEIDA also works in this field. The second meeting was at his office where discussion was mainly regarding village assets creation, livelihood (livestock and agriculture), menstrual hygiene, and clean drinking water.

I had to report directly to Miss Zorini, who was a permanent staff member and who had been with the organization since the start in 2012. I also had to submit weekly reports to the faculty in charge, Dr Maya from the Department of Sociology in our university. Besides this, I maintained a journal where I wrote daily tasks and highlights of the day during the course of my internship for reflection and memory. I was extremely fortunate to work in these three diverse fields and I was able to explore areas which I would never have dreamt of.

Internship Experience

At the organization level, the culture is very friendly and open at NEIDA. I was given orientation regarding the structure and organs/department of organization by the respective workers from each department. They were all very friendly and answered my doubts with patience. The relationship between employees in NEIDA is informal in nature and they address themselves on a first name basis. This includes even the state programme coordinator who is the head of the office. I was informed that all of them go for field work and they spend a lot of time together. Hence this creates a bond between them. The bond that they had could be seen through not just their casual interaction but also their professional life. This was observable through group works between different departments. This made the internship experience very fruitful and insightful since I could see firsthand how both the interaction of their professional and personal lives create a healthy environment. As a student of sociology who is interested in everyday interactions, the most interesting experiences were always the casual interactions and talks with the employees. The human resource manager, Mr Sangtea even made use of this by asking about employees during casual conversations about their queries which was a very smart tactic. Of course serious issues are discussed behind closed doors but the human resource manager creates a safe space for people to talk about their issues publicly.

Out of the many experiences, one that stands out is the involvement of women leaders in the villages regarding the water purifier supply. They are called the Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP) which is a voluntary association of Mizo women and they are established at every village and locality. The leaders gave information to the villages regarding the water purifier and gathered a list of people who wanted it. This was done in February 2019. They were responsible for gathering people to village halls or any suitable place for the awareness programme and delivery. Most of them were very efficient in their work and they guided us since we were not familiar with the villages and the people there. This gives them a sense of self sufficiency and provides

a forum in which they can showcase their leadership abilities. It was very insightful to see how efficient they are working and it shows that their level of group communication was very high. This creates an opportunity for women's voices to be heard, engaging them in decision making at the community level. This gives them access to power at the grassroots level, thus giving them a sense of empowerment.

With regards to the field visit with the Agriculture department due to the fall armyworm outbreak, even though the maize in their land was eaten away by the worm, they had little awareness regarding what exactly was eating away their crops. They were not aware of the threat that the fall armyworm could do to their crops. Since we know that the farmer's means of earning daily bread is their crops, it is disheartening that they have little awareness of what is happening and what will happen in the future with these worms. We traveled to villages, making them aware of the harm that these worms are doing to their crops and providing ways to mitigate damage. One representative from each household came and we would demonstrate awareness programmes in their lands.

Hence the overall experience was good and insightful. I did not expect myself to get involved with the sports department especially since I was informed that I would be part of the Badminton department. But it was satisfying to see children getting involved in sports, which could potentially give them skills to foster as a career. Additionally, girls especially were motivated to venture into sports, which breaks the gender stereotype, empowering them and unleashing their opportunities.

My experiences in the internship ranged from minor bike accidents which will turn out as great stories later in life, hectic field visits, report after reports, encountering strong women leaders, experiencing a fall armyworm outbreak and searching for the worms in the maize fields and others. The people in the village as well as the employees in the office have taught me great lessons in life and they have given me the ability to deal with people of diverse backgrounds. The internship was truly a life experience.

Learning Outcome Professional Growth

The internship has been very enriching. Since we dealt with different people every day, my communication skill has improved a lot. In the office and during the field work, one of the most important requirements is observational skills. Sometimes what people say and their actions seem to conflict. We also need to be familiar with social cues while interacting with different people with different backgrounds. The only platform for this is through continuous interaction and keen observation, which this internship provides. Thus this has also helped me in improving my interpersonal skills.

I was given a deadline to work on my reports for the organization after the field visit. Since I was given less time and there was a lot to write, it helped me work under pressure and there is a huge improvement in my time management. Additionally, since we usually had to wake up at around 5:30 AM during field visits as the schedule starts at 6:00 AM and we had to follow a time schedule as there was lots of work, I learned to work efficiently under pressure. There is also improvement in time management and planning as well.

Working in an organization is all about team work since there is a goal that we have to achieve at the end. The employees were quite familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of their co-workers and when something requires teamwork, they always helped out the other person. There was one such case where my supervisor had issues regarding Excel spreadsheet. When she could not work it out, the company engineer who sat next to her saw it. He immediately taught her how to solve it without him not doing any of her work for her. Even in little things, they do not hesitate to help each other. This has taught me the importance of team work.

Going in the field has also helped me develop my leadership abilities and taught me to become independent. There was one such incident where I stayed back at a village to give awareness regarding safe drinking water while my teammates left for other villages. We were running short on time and we had to cover a few more villages. So I stayed in that village where I did not know anyone for 6 hours (my safety was not compromised). Here the people were very accommodating and they were very patient while listening to me. Waiting for the team in the village had also taught me to be patient.

Personal Growth

I started off as someone who had little awareness about rural problems since I have lived the majority of my life in the city. The internship has made me aware of the problems that people in the village have faced, are facing and are on the threat of facing. Of course I cannot claim to empathize with all of their problems but I am able to understand some of the farmer's problems after going to their fields, which are located on the steep hills where their life hangs by a thread every day. I also feel that the internship has made me develop a different perspective in life since I had the opportunity to talk to different people with different experiences. I am able to look at broader perspectives in life with all my experiences. We often talk about the village life or the rural life as a simple one but the complexity of it seems to be unending with problems rising after the other.

Linking Academy to Community-Community to Academy

The experience has helped in bridging the gap between what we learn in textbooks and the real world. There were vibrant experiences from the office as well as the fieldworks which made the experience very insightful. I got to know and understand the experiences of the people in the rural areas through field work and my experiences were very enriching. Seeing that the rural people who are beneficiaries of the projects have close

relationships with the employees made me realize that the organization is very serious when it comes to their development projects and uplifting the less advantageous groups. They genuinely care about the farmers and other vulnerable groups and they are trying their best to help them come out of their problems and become independent. As an organization, NEIDA is continuously growing and it has proved to be beyond my expectations. I have learned group dynamics and team work especially from the employees and I shall remain thankful everyday for the department and the organization for giving me the opportunity to experience society in a much different way.

As part of a reflective process, like mentioned, I had maintained a field journal which later on became an important element in my learning process as a young sociologist. This reflection process did not just stop after the final presentation of internship in front of faculties from the department. Time and time again, I would go through my notes and photographs, which I had also used as visual field journals. Since I was fortunate to experience diverse areas in my internship, I often apply what I had experienced and observed in classroom discussions as well as social discussions. I believe this is one of the most important aspects of experiential learning. We apply theories in the field and the experiences with communities in turn, help us in assessing theories that we learn in classrooms. It really brings me into achieving what Freire calls 'critical consciousness' and I believe all sociology courses should implement experience learning into their course structure.

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