CONCEPTUALIZING THE QUALITY OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION WORK TERM EXPERIENCES:
AN EXPLORATION FROM THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

DAVID DREWERY
WATERLOO CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
200 UNIVERISTY AVE WEST
WATERLOO ON, CAN
DWDREWERY@UWATERLOO.CA

JUDENE PRETTI
WATERLOO CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
200 UNIVERISTY AVE WEST
WATERLOO ON, CAN
TJPRETTI@UWATERLOO.CA

Funded by the Ontario Human Capital Research and Innovation Fund (OHCRIF) through the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
AGENDA

» BACKGROUND

» PURPOSE

» METHODOLOGY

» DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

» RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS
Work terms play a central role in co-op education (Eames & Cates, 2011)

There is an emergent understanding of work term “quality” (WTQ)

Elements of WTQ likely include:

- Relatedness (Smith, 2012; Stern, Stone, Hopkins, McMillion, & Cagampang, 1992)
- Challenge (Apostolides & Looye, 1997; Wiseman & Page, 2001)
- Supervisors (Laycock, Hermon, & Laetz, 1992)
PROBLEM

- Influence of work term quality on student development is not well understood (Laycock, Hermon, & Laetz, 1992; Leslie & Richardson, 2000)
- We have yet to investigate the ways in which quality can be influenced
- Students are central stakeholders yet their perspective remains unexplored

IMPORTANCE

- Increased pressure to enhance quality of work experiences in WIL programs (Chapman, Coll, & Meech, 1999; Coll & Chapman, 2000; Hill 1995)
- Enhancing quality likely supports student development (Apostolides & Looye, 1997; Watson & Cates, 2014)

CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
PURPOSE

- To identify the factors which influence the quality of students’ co-op work term experiences (from the student perspective)
- To explore students’ perspectives on the outcomes of quality co-op work terms

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: How do co-op students characterize high-quality co-op work terms?
- RQ2: To what do co-op students attribute high-quality co-op work terms?
- RQ3: What do co-op students identify as outcome of high-quality co-op work terms?
METHODOLOGY

- Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2000; 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
  - Allows for themes to emerge (Patton, 1990; Strauss, 1987) through open and selective coding
  - Offers a theory about a process (i.e., theory about how to reach quality)

METHOD

- 20 semi-structured interviews (~60 minutes) conducted by co-op students
- Snowball sampling from co-op students’ network
- Participants asked to identify how and why
RQ1: What are the Characteristics of Quality?

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GREAT CO-OP JOB

**CONNECTIONS**

Students want to see overlap between the experience, school, and future work.

Somewhere that I’d actually learned and gained some knowledge that I could apply to future work terms.

**IMPACT**

Students give great importance to making a positive contribution to their work-term.

I guess feeling like you’ve contributed, you’re not doing things just to be busy [...] you’re doing something that they’re going to put into practice and you know you’re contributing to the company even in a small way even. Just feeling like you’ve not just contributed, but you’ve helped out, like you’ve helped people.

**LEARNING**

Students crave learning opportunities, and judge quality in terms of what they have “taken away”.

My main priority is what I can retain from it. So like, even if a job paid a lot but didn’t offer me that much in skills I would probably take a lower paying job that gets me more skills.

CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
RQ2: What Factors Influence Quality?

FOUR INFLUENCERS OF WORK-TERM QUALITY

THE “SET UP”

Students identified that setting up the experience is critical to its success. This involves two main processes:

SUPERVISOR

“The most important thing is probably a great supervisor. Cause at the end of the day, they look after you and you have to go to them no matter what so having someone above you that’s reliable and responsible is definitely key to having... excellent work.”

TEAM

“A high-quality co-op experience is really dependent on [...] the team around you and the philosophy of that team.”

THE ROLE

The nature of the role must support connection, impact and relevance. Three things should characterize the role:

CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
Students identified that setting up the experience is critical to its success. This involves two main components:

- **Onboarding**
  - Goal setting – setting goals with supervisor
  - Training and orientation – formal components
  - Socialization – getting to know people

- **Adjustment**
  - Knowing what to do
  - Knowing how to do it
  - Fitting in while doing it
Factor 2: The Supervisor

Relationships with supervisors drive the entire co-op work term experiences. Students identified three characteristics of excellent supervisor relationships:

- Supports me – providing resources to complete the job; allowing the freedom/latitude necessary to perform well
- Challenges and pushes me – encouraging students; providing opportunities to struggle and to learn
- Mentors and guides me – sharing career-related advice; providing job-related feedback
FACTOR 3: THE TEAM

Consistently participants mentioned the team environment as having an influence on the experience. Teams support and guide behaviour, and also contribute to learning (broadly). Three aspects are important:

- Mutual respect – students want to be respected and trusted; they want the rights and responsibilities of their peers

- Friendliness – students desire a team environment in which they are fully immersed as a “friend”; they do not want to be “the co-op student”

- Coordination – similarly, students seek to be an integral component of the team, with shared values and direction
The characteristics of the role (the set of duties and the place within a larger organizational context) shape the experience. Students desire three things:

- That the work is meaningful – “My ideal work term is something where [...] I’m not just given menial tasks but they’re giving me something that’s a bit more challenging that I can actually learn from.”

- That they have discretion – “Giving me a chance to do my own thing to kind of show initiative.”

- That the experience is integrated – “You can apply what you learn in school. It’s definitely the most important thing. Especially for me because we learn so much, and you’re just overwhelmed with concepts all the time. So if you can find a placement [sic] that utilizes your skills, you know, that lets you shine.”

Centre for the Advancement of Co-operative Education
RQ3: The Outcomes of High-quality Work Terms

FOUR MAIN OUTCOMES

**POSITIVE AFFECT**
While reflecting on high-quality experiences, students feel excited, proud, inspired, and that they had fun.

**CONTEXTUALIZED UNDERSTANDING**
They just tell you all this stuff in school and you’re like “okay, does it really matter?” Then you get there and you’re like, “oh wow, I can actually see where this is going, how companies are actually interacting in the business world.”

**MARKETABILITY**
“The key is experience for a future employer to see what you’ve done and if you’ve succeeded or not. And how you handled it.”

**NEW PERSPECTIVES**
“I feel like [...] has given me a more realistic idea of what I can expect...yeah, it’s given me a clearer perspective of what I want to do.”

CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION
**DISCUSSION**

**RQ1:** The characteristics of quality identified here are consistent with previous research. Reflecting on experiences, students are likely to identify quality under the conditions that they 1) had a positive impact, 2) learned something new and beneficial, and 3) made connections between school and work.

**RQ2:** The contribution of this study was in identifying (from a student perspective), the factors which contribute to quality work terms.

**RQ3:** The outcomes identified here are consistent with co-op pedagogy and with co-op’s core value proposition. This suggests that students understand what co-op contributes and points to the importance of enhancing quality.
NEXT STEPS

For research:
1. Quantify the influence of quality on development
2. Explore these factors in other WIL contexts
3. Study other stakeholders’ understandings of quality

For practice:
1. Facilitate relationships between students and supervisors/co-workers
2. Assist students to find connections
3. Support and educate supervisors to be both “managers” and “mentors”
4. Enable managers to successfully “onboard” newcomers
The Supervisor toolkit:

WATCACE
CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

Employer Resources

SUPPORTTOOLS
RESOURCES TO BUILD SUCCESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Contact WatCACE
Centre for the Advancement of Co-operative Education
University of Waterloo
200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
N2L 3G1
Phone: 519-888-4567 x32355
Email: watcace@uwaterloo.ca
Website Feedback

For more: https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-advancement-co-operative-education/employer-resources


