

Article

Using Online Discussion Forums to Enhance and Document Students' Workplace Learning Experiences: A Semi-Private Emirati University's Context

Semiyu Adejare Aderibigbe ^{1,2,*} , Abdel Rahman Ahmed AbdelRahman ² and Hussain Al Othman ²¹ Institute of Leadership in Higher Education, Sharjah P.O. Box 27272, United Arab Emirates² College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sharjah,
Sharjah P.O. Box 27272, United Arab Emirates; aabdelrahman@sharjah.ac.ae (A.R.A.A.)

* Correspondence: saderibigbe@sharjah.ac.ae

Abstract: Workplace learning experience complements students' learning at the university and equips them with practical skills required in professional work contexts. Given its importance, educators must constantly devise strategies to enhance students' workplace learning and collect contextual data to determine how best to support them in collaboration with the internship sites. In this study, we adopted the online discussion forum to supplement undergraduate students' workplace learning in a semi-private Emirati university through reflection and workplace knowledge sharing with colleagues asynchronously. Using a qualitative approach, we ethically retrieved and thematically analyzed students' contributions to the online discussion forum. Our findings indicate that students found the orientation week beneficial and the knowledge gained at the university, such as communication and information technology, resourceful. Additionally, students found integration into the new context, time management, language issues, and emailing challenging. Despite the reported challenges, students indicated that the workplace learning experience strengthened their practical skills, including managing time, working with different people, and communicating within different contexts to smooth their transition to professional work contexts. Based on the findings, we suggest using online discussion to supplement workplace learning as an essential element for educators to consider when developing programs. We also recommend pre-internship orientations where expectations, roles, and required knowledge are discussed to prepare students for successful workplace learning experiences.

Keywords: workplace learning; undergraduate students; online discussion; Emirati university

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1. Introduction

Workplace learning in higher education refers to the process of acquiring skills, knowledge, and experience through on-the-job training, internships, apprenticeships, or other forms of experiential learning in a professional setting [1,2]. Workplace learning is essential in higher education as it allows students to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings and develop practical skills [3]. By interfacing with others in professional workplace contexts, students develop a deeper understanding of the concepts they have learned and enhance their preparation for the job market. In addition, workplace learning can also help students build their professional network and better understand the industry or sector they are interested in working in after their university education. As reported, students who participate in workplace learning programs are more likely to secure employment in their field of study and receive higher salaries than students who do not participate in such programs [3].

Moreover, workplace learning is crucial in helping higher education students to develop critical transferrable and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, managing conflicts, and problem-solving. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reported that these skills are highly valued by employers today and are essential for success

in different workplace contexts [4]. Likewise, workplace learning can expose students to different cultures and work environment traditions, broadening their perspectives and developing their global awareness for personal and professional growth. This socialization process, without any hesitation, is particularly essential in today's globalized job market and highly diverse societies, where cross-cultural communication and understanding of diversity (cultural intelligence) are becoming increasingly important [5].

In recent years, advances in technology have had a significant impact on students' workplace learning. For instance, online learning platforms, virtual reality simulations, and other technology-based learning tools have allowed students to access and engage in workplace learning opportunities anywhere in the world [6]. This development has dramatically reduced the pressure associated with institution-home distance [7] and enabled students to engage in complementary efforts to enhance their face-to-face learning engagements through online platforms in different disciplinary contexts [8]. More so, using technology-mediated platforms guided by open innovation principles for promoting collaboration and networking opportunities between higher education and external agencies foster students' professional knowledge development [9]. Not only can higher education students gain professional skills from engagement with external agencies, but there can also be opportunities to share knowledge and resources for improving professional practices.

As students get more comfortable using digital tools and technology-enabled solutions are indispensable in today's learning process [10], we opted to support their workplace learning using the online discussion forum in this research context (see method section). Adopting this approach aligns with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) vision to strengthen the application of smart devices and technology in teaching and learning [11]. Taking advantage of the platform's functionalities [8,12], we allowed students to reflect and asynchronously engage in conversations to foster their workplace learning experiences. However, our primary goal in this study was to determine how students engage and assist each other to learn through the platform. We considered this endeavor essential as some studies report that students may not fully appreciate or effectively utilize new pedagogical media consistently with the identified goals and intents [13,14]. Further, the literature suggests the need to regularly explore students' experiences in new learning contexts and platforms [12,15,16]. Besides, students have shown interest in the value of online education in the UAE [17], and studies have been conducted on workplace learning in the country [18,19]. However, there is a shortage of studies on workplace learning driven or supported by online pedagogical media.

Thus, we undertook this study to examine and document students' workplace learning experiences through the online discussion medium in an Emirati university context. Rather than looking at the platform's effectiveness, we focused on how students collaboratively used it to share experiences to enhance their professional knowledge and skills. As such, we explored students' impressions of internship sites' orientation, challenges and issues, knowledge gained at the university before the internship, and knowledge gained at their internship sites as objectives for achieving the study's goal. In the remaining parts of this section, we discussed scholarly thoughts, research findings, and theoretical frameworks related to workplace learning and online discussion. After that, we presented our methods, results, and discussion sections. Following these, we reported our conclusion, limitations, and suggestions for further studies sections.

1.1. Benefits of Workplace Learning

The benefits of workplace learning for higher education students have been extensively researched and documented in academic literature. For instance, workplace learning provides students with practical experience and hands-on training, which can help them stand out in the job market and increase their chances of securing employment after graduation [20]. Through workplace learning experience, students develop transferable skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and leadership, which employers highly value and seek [21]. In addition, workplace learning allows students to apply the ideas, theories, and concepts learned in the classroom to real-life situations, which can

deepen their understanding and make their education more relevant and meaningful [22]. Besides, workplace learning provides students with opportunities to interact with professionals in their field, make connections, and build relationships that can be valuable throughout their careers [20]. Exposure to workplace learning experience can also help students develop a sense of competence and confidence in their abilities, improving their self-esteem and overall well-being [21].

1.2. Issues and Challenges in Workplace Learning

Despite the benefits, workplace learning can be daunting and challenging for students. As reported in the literature, these challenges include inadequate preparation, limited opportunities for workplace learning, insufficient support from employers and educational institutions, and lack of relevance and practicality of academic knowledge. Other issues reported are the inadequate motivation for participation, broadening accessibility, difficulty balancing workplace learning and academic responsibilities, lack of opportunity for reflection and feedback, insufficient recognition of workplace learning by educational institutions, resistance to change, designing appropriate discussion structures, and resistance to incorporating workplace learning into the curriculum [23–26]. It is important to note that these challenges can vary depending on the specific context, including the industry, country, and student demographics. For instance, personality clashes and insufficient time were reported as challenges for workplace learning in an initial teacher education practicum context [27].

1.3. Best Practices in Workplace Learning

In enhancing workplace learning, scholars reported some measures as best practices. Combining traditional face-to-face learning approaches with technology-based learning, such as e-learning, mobile learning, and gamification, described as a blended learning approach, can make learning more engaging and effective [28,29]. Customizing training and professional support to meet learners' individual needs and preferences in what is described as personalized learning is also reported to strengthen workplace learning [30]. Doing this includes using different active and hands-on learning activities, discussions, and simulations to promote knowledge retention and application [31] and collaboration among learners and experts [32]. Besides, providing just-in-time information and resources to learners on the job helps them perform their tasks more effectively [33]. Moreover, promoting continuous learning enhances workplace learning [34] through self-regulated activities with students taking ownership of the process and also supported by a more experienced person [35].

1.4. Theoretical Frameworks for Workplace Learning

As the literature indicates, numerous theoretical frameworks exist for planning, implementing, and exploring workplace learning in higher education. Among these theories are those highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Theoretical Frameworks for Workplace Learning.

Theory	Assumption
Experiential Learning Theory [36]	Learning is a process of transforming experiences into knowledge through reflection and action.
Situated Learning Theory [37]	Learning is situated within a particular context and is influenced by the culture and community of the learner.
Connectivism [38]	Knowledge is distributed across networks, and that learning is the process of creating and connecting new connections within these networks.
Constructivism [39]	Individuals actively construct their knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the world.
Communities of Practice [40]	Individuals learn through participation in communities with a common purpose and domain of interest.
Self-Determination Theory [41]	Individuals have a natural tendency towards growth and development, and learning is enhanced when learners are given the autonomy and resources to pursue their goals.
Social Presence Theory [42]	Individuals perceive others as real persons for social engagement in technology-enabled and mediated communication.

1.5. Benefits and Strategies for Effective Online Discussion in Workplace Learning

The role of online discussion in workplace learning for higher education students has been widely researched and documented in the literature. For instance, online discussion assists students in improving their knowledge and skills. It allows students to understand course content better and enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills [43]. The online discussion provides a platform for students to engage in collaborative learning, exchange ideas and provide constructive feedback to one another, thereby strengthening their understanding [44], with limited face-to-face interactions [45]. Through collaborative engagements, students build a sense of community and belonging [46], which motivates them to share comfortably and co-construct knowledge with their colleagues [38].

Further, it helps students develop and foster reflective and self-directed learning skills by critically analyzing issues and connecting them to real-life experiences at an appropriate pace [46]. In maximizing the benefits of online discussion in workplace learning, learning facilitators must incorporate multimedia into the adopted online forum that is secure, safe, inclusive, and promotes active interactions [47–49]. Additionally, educators must provide clear guidelines and monitor learning conversations through online discussion forums [50,51]. Doing these ensures high-quality students' engagement and learning among students as institutions intensify efforts to devise strategies for enhancing teaching and learning for different students' generations, including online platforms [52].

1.6. Process and Framework for Supporting Students' Workplace Learning in this Study

Drawing on the literature review, we align our thoughts with previous studies acknowledging the vital place of workplace learning to enhance students' professional knowledge in preparation for future roles. We also recognize the need to familiarize ourselves with challenges and best practices in workplace learning. More importantly, we acknowledge the need to facilitate workplace learning considering the theoretical frameworks highlighted in Table 1 and enhance students' learning experiences using online discussion forums.

Based on the framework in Figure 1, we conducted this study to explore students' workplace learning experience by seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. How do students describe the orientations given at their internship sites?
2. What do students portray as challenges and issues experienced at their internship sites?
3. How do students perceive the importance of the knowledge gained in the university at their internship sites?
4. How do students intend to use the knowledge and skills developed at the internship sites be used in the future?

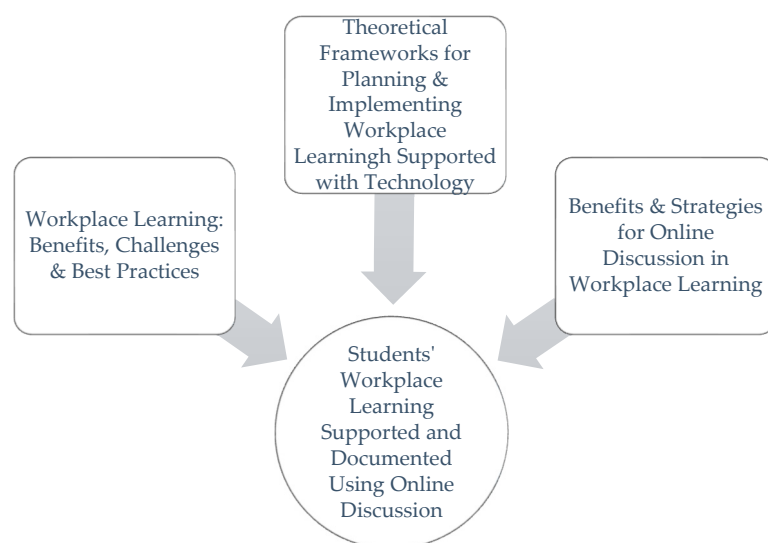


Figure 1. Process for planning and supporting students' workplace learning using online discussion.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

In this study, we adopted the qualitative research design, which aligns with constructivist and interpretivist philosophical thoughts. As argued, these philosophical strands hold that realities vary depending on contexts, unique experiences, and subjective understanding in the tradition of the Weberian concept of *verstehen* [53,54]. So, we employed this approach to explore our students' reflective knowledge of workplace learning based on their peculiar, subjective, and nuanced experiences within different internship sites.

2.2. Context and Data Collection

We conducted this study in the context of a National Internship course for a department's graduating undergraduate students in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences within a semi-private university in the UAE. In this college, students of some departments undertake internships to complement their on-campus learning in preparation for future professional roles. As part of the course, the students were placed in different government and private organizations nationwide, including the federal ministries and emirate (state)-controlled institutions, such as police, courts, and cultural heritage centers. So, this enterprise allows students to learn in specific socio-cultural contexts, put theories into practice, and enhance their professional learning in real-life workplaces [36–39].

In collecting data, we invited all 65 students enrolled in the National Internship course to participate in four voluntary and non-graded online discussions. We mainly used online discussion forums to allow students to reflect and share information on their workplace learning [42]. Through this community of learners' model influenced by situated learning, connectivist, and constructivist theories, students engaged in intellectual and collaborative learning conversations to foster their personal and professional development by drawing on their internship experiences [37–40]. Table 2 shows the online discussion tasks and students' contributions.

Table 2. Online Discussion Tasks and Students' Contributions.

S/N	Online Discussion	Total Contributions	Participation Rate
1	Share your orientation experience at your internship site and how the exercise can help you integrate, learn from others, and help others learn as an intern.	224	65 (100%)
2	How have you been using what you learned/developed as skills at the university in your roles as an intern in a workplace context?	175	59 (91%)
3	What challenges have you experienced, and how did you address the issues as an intern?	124	45 (69%)
4	How would you use the knowledge gained during the internship period as a student and a professional in the future?	124	44 (68%)

Table 1 shows students' participation rates in online discussions 1 and 2 are above 90%, while their participation rates in online discussions 3 and 4 are 68% and 69%, respectively. The reduction in students' participation rates in the last two tasks was unsurprising. Other reports indicated that students' participation in online tasks tends to decrease towards the end of semesters [15].

We used systematic random sampling from each discussion task to select transcripts to be analyzed. In doing this, we chose students' transcripts at the count of 4, leading to the data presented in Table 3. We opted for this number of transcripts as we were not interested in seeking data for generalization but rich and nuanced data for documenting subjective experiences [15,55].

Table 3. Students' Online Discussion Posts and Randomly Selected Transcripts.

Online Discussion	Participation	Selected Transcripts
First	65	16
Second	59	14
Third	45	11
Fourth	44	11
Total	213	52

2.3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Following the grounded theory, we analyzed the data retrieved using an inductive thematic approach [56]. We read the transcripts severally for immersion and a thorough understanding of the student's thoughts on their workplace learning experiences. Afterward, we generated key themes supported by codes, depicting the common and shared students' views. We engaged in an iterative process of reviewing the emerging themes, focusing on the research objectives, and lending trustworthiness to the study [57].

Lastly, it is essential to highlight that our data collection process complied with ethical research standards. For instance, we got our college research committee's ethical approval to conduct the study and got permission to extract data from the online discussions from the students without any objections. More so, students were not coerced to participate in the online discussions, and the tasks were not graded as earlier mentioned. We ensured that no names were mentioned in any part of this report and that the findings did not negatively impact any individuals or organizations. As seen in the findings section, we anonymized students' identities using transcripts and figures, e.g., T1 stands for transcript 1, representing a participant.

3. Results

In this section, we presented and structured our findings around the four objectives of the study as follows:

3.1. What Students Find Appealing about Workplace Orientation

Through the data analyzed, three themes emerged as what students find appealing about workplace orientation during the internship period. The themes are as follows:

3.1.1. Socialization and Expectations' Clarifications

Students found the opportunity to know about organizations and clarify expectations appealing. This sentiment is enunciated as follows:

We started the week by learning about the department we work in and what work we have to do for this whole internship in a general way. Our department is divided into four sections media, finance, human resources, and international relations. (T1)

The first week of my internship focused on introducing the department, it's vision and projects, and being introduced to the teams around and discussing their projects. (T6)

I started my training in the public relations section, where they defined the sections of the organization in general, the role of each department, and how each section in each department connected and completed each other at the same time. (T12)

3.1.2. Networking Opportunities

Students showed appreciation for the networking opportunities during the orientation week at their internship sites. As they explained in the texts below, they treasure the chance to meet with the top leadership of some government and non-government establishments:

I completed the training this week in a section, observing them in their management of meetings with VIP people. (T3)

I met with the Attorney-General, who explained to me the work of the Council quickly and helpfully. In the first week of training, I met delegations from abroad and talked and dealt with them. I also participated in the last session of the previous legislative term. (T11)

Another thing I did that week was contact people who were interested in promoting their businesses, which helped me improve my communication skills. (T9)

3.1.3. Exposure to Fast-Paced Work Environments

Students indicated that the orientation week exposed them to fast-paced work settings and the opportunity to learn under pressure. To them, that is appealing as they did not only get to know their internship sites, but they also had to put ideas into practice and enhance their soft skills during the week:

This week has taught me how to work under pressure and with a short duration of time. I have to make a plan of what to do with a certain amount of time, and give the time for other activities as well. So this week basically with its a lot of activities teach me the time management and cooperate with other to fulfill your activities. (T3)

... we learned how to write diplomatic notes, official letters, and archives using the ministry system. (T8)

I was told to draft emails to send to clients and other staffers. At first, I had to get a second pair of eyes to look at these drafts, but eventually, I could send them to staffers directly (but for clients, I'd get someone else to check, just in case). (T4)

3.2. How Students Applied Their Prior University Knowledge and Skills at Internship Sites

Students indicated they discharged duties and assigned tasks using knowledge and skills they developed at the university. In particular, they identified the following four knowledge and skills emerging from the data analyzed:

3.2.1. Information Technology Skills

Students acknowledged that the information technology skills gained through the Introduction to Information Technology course taken at the university were helpful to them at the internship sites. They explained as follows:

Many of the skills I have learned at university have been extremely useful in my work placement. As several other students have mentioned, the Intro to IT course has been one of the main courses that have provided me with the skills that made my work easier. It has improved my MS Excel skills, which has been very beneficial since many of the tasks I have done at work included using MS Excel. (T1)

The course Introduction to IT gave us basic information that I thought I would never use, but most of the work I did was by using all what I learned during that course. (T9)

As many other students while enrolling in the required course "Introduction to IT" I used to always say this course won't be relevant in our future careers, however while interring at the Authority I have been given tasks to use the excel program that the IT course have taught us. (T12)

3.2.2. Research and Report Writing Skills

Students also found the research skills gained from research-oriented courses and activities, such as research methods and report writing, beneficial as interns. They indicated having research skills assisted them in easily and effectively completing some tasks:

Other courses that I have benefited from include Research Methods. It has equipped me with the necessary research skills that helped me get work done faster and more efficiently. (T1)

During my study period at the university, I earned many skills I use in my internship work. For example, I learned how to make reports and research, which I applied in my internship. (T7)

As an intern at my organization, I have been assigned with various research and report making tasks as I've experienced in University, and have thus been able to complete these tasks with confidence. Not to mention, needing to present these ideas requires communication skills which University has provided as a hub for development. (T11)

3.2.3. Diplomatic Skills

Students acknowledged the importance of diplomatic knowledge and skills gained at the university and considered the skills beneficial during the internship. They indicated that they developed the skills through courses such as diplomacy, government, and UAE society:

During my past years at the University, I have learned much from my courses. Throughout the training process, I realized I was familiar with most of the processes. For instance, thanks to Diplomacy, I know most of the terms and how bilateral relations work. Governance in the UAE was the most helpful as I came across the country's constitution and federal system. (T4)

Specifically, Diplomacy and Foreign Policy courses were helpful in what I am training in the ministry. I am dealing with Diplomats and working on things such as the Protocol and visit affairs between the countries. (T5)

Furthermore, learning about foreign policy and diplomacy within our course plan has provided me with background information on prevailing and preceding international relations which can define our future plans and work proposals within the organization. Governance in the UAE has also served as a very informative and useful course. I am grateful to have taken this course amongst many others which have prepared myself and many of my colleagues for the workforce. (T11)

3.2.4. Communication Skills

Students found the communication skills developed at the university vital for their success at the internship sites. They explained that they gained the skills through language lessons, report and presentation tasks:

University has prepared me for the workforce in multiple ways. Some ways which can be noted include research methods and presentation/communication skills. (T11)

Lastly, the Arabic Language was also one of the main courses that helped me improve my Arabic writing skills, primarily since governmental institutions rely on Arabic as their primary communication language. It has enabled me to write and respond to emails and letters in Arabic. (T1)

My communication skills have also grown because of the presentations that we have done in most of our courses. Moreover, I have also developed my communication skills by communicating with the HR department by email. By mentioning official emails, I would like to thank my professor (xxx), who was the first person to teach me how to write an official email in the Intro to IR course. (T5)

3.3. What Challenges did Students Face, and How did They Address Them as Interns?

In terms of challenges faced by students during the internship, three main themes emerged from the data analyzed. They are presented as follows:

3.3.1. Issues with Managing Time and Tasks

Students reported time and task management as challenges they faced mid-way through the internship. They reckoned that could have been the case for anyone new to a work context and shared some tips for overcoming the challenge:

So the first challenge I faced was "Time Management," which can be difficult when settling into a new training area and adjusting to your new responsibilities. To overcome this challenge, I created a goal list. Moreover, breaking down your tasks will make them seem more manageable, keep you organized and help you to be more productive and efficient. I always ask a coworker for advice or speak with my supervisor to prioritize the work. (T7)

I faced a significant challenge where my time was to work without any breaks. But I tried to overcome this challenge as I worked harder and asked for help from my advisor. The most important of these skills is the ability to organize a working time to get maximum productivity during a specific time, but some of us may have difficulty. (T2)

The challenges include giving me multitasks at the same time with my supervisors in the last weeks of my internship. They gave me multitasks because I proved that I could do many tasks in the various sections. But I overthrew this challenge by dividing the tasks into small ones and focusing on each one. (T1)

3.3.2. Fitting into a New Work Environment and Understanding Personality Differences

Students thought it was challenging to adapt to a new workplace where they had to operate with institutional guidelines and people with different personalities. However, they felt the challenge could be addressed with measures highlighted in the texts below:

The challenges I have been through were nothing more than being in a new place and getting to know new people and their different personalities. (T5)

The second challenge I have faced is "Fitting In." It's hard to figure out how to be part of a new job, and it can be frustrating. Get to know your coworkers by working on team projects. Furthermore, this promotes common interests and builds trust. Also, when I don't understand anything, I ask questions to my supervisor. It's great to be friendly and respectful in the workplace, communicate with others, and be comfortable doing the work you are assigned. A good attitude, manners, and work habits will show that you're professional. (T7)

Another challenge was to interfere with the working atmosphere and get intensely used to it as employees, not students. We also got to work individually sometimes, which challenged us to improve our skills. We addressed all these challenges by practicing and interfering with other people to improve their skills and work. (T12)

Students, however, associated this challenge with the fact that some may be reserved and shy and may need some time. They admitted that the issue is surmountable with time and the re-assuring support from their supervisors.

One of the main challenges I faced was not knowing how to ask for things, whether it be a desk to work on or tasks to accomplish. I looked for guidance by asking my instructor and friends because I felt I might bother those around me by asking for things I needed. (T9)

It was hard for me to communicate with the different departments there, as I was very shy at the beginning, but I overcame this challenge with time. (T4)

3.3.3. Problems with Writing Emails and Report in Arabic

Despite the majority being native Arabs, students indicated that they struggled to write emails and reports in Arabic. The thoughts are highlighted as follows:

It requires a massive effort because, in this field, we use multiple languages, including Arabic and English. This makes our work as a research team a challenging matter. (T12)

We faced challenges such as writing our research in Arabic, which is different than what we're used to in university. (T10)

It was tough for me to type emails in Arabic, and I did not overcome this challenge. They kept giving me emails to type to learn how to type in Arabic, and I did not learn from that. I forgot the format of writing in Arabic since I joined the university. And as I am a very shy person, it was hard for me to contact people and other departments such as public services when our department needed something. (T4)

3.4. How Students Plan to Use the Essential Skills Gained at the Internship Sites in the Future

Drawing on the data analyzed, four themes emerged as to how students intend to use the most valuable skills gained during the internship in the future. The themes are the following:

3.4.1. Ability to Learn and Integrate Ideas from Other Disciplinary and Cultural Contexts

Students felt grateful for developing knowledge of how different fields are interconnected through their internship experience and why undergraduates must build such an understanding. To them, knowledge of multiple domains and cultural contexts is essential for future generations of professionals in IR and other fields:

I was worried about doing my training in the court because I didn't feel I could relate to Law. But through the weeks, I realized that the court is relevant to our international relations major. It is an essential societal entity, concerned with people's safety and security. It seeks justice and equality and cooperates with all governmental channels to achieve justice. (T1)

I'll surely use this information in the future, and in the university, I learned a lot of them, and I learned about media and its relation to IR. (T5)

Learning about the cultural perspective of tourism and how gaining additional languages can be very crucial to be able to work in this field, and be more culturally aware of the different people we might face while working in tourism-related fields. This is very beneficial for interns considering working in similar fields as they can widen their perspectives on these issues. I'm happy I have gone through this experience. (T11)

3.4.2. Time Management Knowledge and Skills

Students indicated that they gained the knowledge to manage time effectively as students and professionals in the future. With this knowledge, they believe they can complete tasks on time to achieve organizational targets and goals:

I have gained a lot of knowledge during my internship period that will help me in the future. For example, time management, in which in my future job and elsewhere in my life, was the most critical skill that I have gained from this experience. They gave me multiple tasks to finish, in which I prioritized every task and decided how long to spend on each task. (T2)

I have learned how to work according to schedule and time management because they are extremely strict over time and deliver work in their specified time. I hope this experience will benefit me in the future. (T7)

During my 5-week stay as an intern, I have learned a lot of things that would be helpful in my future profession. I've learned to work on a schedule and time management because they are very strict with time. (T9)

3.4.3. Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Students identified communication and interpersonal skills as essential transferrable acumen developed and strengthened during the internship. As they explained, enhancing these skills is critical for professionals to convey messages and interface with different people confidently:

I have learned how to communicate with people professionally and not to be shy and speak up or ask questions. Also, I am okay with knowing new people and having conversations with them, and the last thing I am not afraid of speaking in front of many people. All these things will help me as a student and in my future career. (T4)

I learned to communicate with others and ask the questions I wanted to know. The presence of delegations has increased my ability to communicate with different nationalities and the strength of my language. This will help me in my future work, and I will be able to work and deal with others through the communication and experience gained during the training. (T7)

The first thing I learned was to communicate with others and ask questions whenever needed. As a student, this will help me understand the material that I am studying and deliver better assignments. Regarding my future job, I will be able to work and deal with others and enhance the level of work I will submit. (T8)

3.4.4. Understanding How the Workplace Environments Work in Reality

Students treasured the exposure and understanding of how workplaces' modes of operation. This endeavor to them includes knowing how to follow guidelines and maintain professional relationships with colleagues:

It was a pleasant experience to see how actual work is and learn more about how I should do things. This will allow me to know more about the work environment before entering a real job. (T4)

Following instructions closely is also an excellent asset to expand on, which can also be applied in many situations from here on out. (T5)

During my month-long internship, I had complete insight into the dynamic of the workplace and how it operates in detail, which would help me in my future job. I also learned to control my temper while being in conferences and meetings. Even though it could get a little intimidating, being able to present your work and observe respectfully is vital, and that is also a point I am willing to make during my time at the university and in the future. (T3)

4. Discussion

In this study, we collected and analyzed data from the online discussion forum employed to complement students' workplace learning in an internship course. Like previous studies, students' participation in the forum was encouraging as the collaborative cum non-threatening platform allowed them to reflect and share learning experiences [6,15,48,49]. From our findings, students appreciated the orientation week in their various internship sites through the learning conversations on the system. Instead of getting overwhelmed with the new contexts, the orientation week allowed them to build networks [38] and undergo a socialization process within cultural contexts along with their peers [37]. Students may have reported positive orientation experiences because the internship sites provided enabling environments to integrate and understand how things work in the contexts. Besides, being able to adjust and integrate into their various sites may suggest they have prepared adequately for the internship and appear to know what to expect during the week. Thus, internship program developers and facilitators may want to consider adequate grooming of interns before the program's commencement to help them transition smoothly into new workplace contexts.

Regarding their prior knowledge, students indicated they came to the sites with some transferrable skills developed at the university, which they applied at internship sites. As the literature suggests, students can transform previous experiences into knowledge by reflecting and putting their prior knowledge into action [36,39]. For instance, they explained that they found the technological and report writing skills they developed at the university through some General Education (GNED) and departmental courses beneficial at the internship. Additionally, they found the communication and diplomatic skills developed at

the university helpful in navigating their new systems and engaging with others. As noted, GNED offered students the chance to build knowledge and skills to enhance their personal and professional development apart from their core courses [56]. However, it is essential to acknowledge that they could use their knowledge as the internship sites offered them the chance to learn autonomously [41] and collaboratively where necessary [40]. So, faculty and academic advisors should encourage students to prioritize the GNED courses and their core courses for complementary soft skills development with which they can excel within and outside the university environments. Doing this ensures they develop contemporary and employability skills in today's competitive job markets. On the other hand, internship sites should plan, support and facilitate students' professional learning using different media and approaches, including technology-enabled activities and individual and group-focused tasks. With these measures, students are given the impression that they are well-prepared, capable, and can be trusted with job-related responsibilities without being left to sink or swim by providing adequate support when necessary.

Despite finding the orientation week at the internship sites and skills developed at the university beneficial, students acknowledged some challenges faced at the various internship sites. Among these challenges is difficulty integrating into the new work environment, which may be informed by different *modus operandi* and personality differences among staff [23–26]. This revelation is not entirely surprising as people may need time to understand a new workplace terrain and develop strategies to engage with different personalities. In a mentoring study, personality clash was reported as a challenge for students in practicum sites [27]. However, in this study, students had issues with time management and on-time task completion, possibly because of the changes in institutional practices that may require time and the need to complete tasks using different approaches. Besides, some students struggled to write emails and reports in Arabic, perhaps because they attended international schools and are studying in English at the university, which may reduce their competencies in other languages. So, those providing learning support for students at internship sites need to give students time to understand the new work terrain and individual staff differences [27]. More importantly, internship sites must not assume that students are vast in a language without diagnostic assessment to determine what they are most comfortable with, may find more enjoyable, and can be used to complete official tasks.

Even with the challenges experienced, students acknowledged developing some skills through the internship and hope to use them in other contexts after their internship experiences. As the data shows, students will draw on their internship experiences to develop learning strategies and integrate ideas from different disciplinary and cultural contexts to enhance their learning within and outside the university. Through this endeavor, the internship process makes students' learning authentic and guided by connectivism and constructivism [36,38,39]. With such opportunities, students develop skills and confidence to sustain employability in the future, as they will understand how workplace contexts work and their expectations [21,29]. Not surprisingly, students also believe their knowledge of communication, interpersonal, and time management skills will assist in propelling them in the future in their university and post-university careers. This finding reinforces the vital place of GNED courses [56] and the need for students to be adequately groomed to develop transferrable skills through GNED, core courses, and advising endeavors.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Drawing on the data collected and analyzed in this study, we conclude that students' learning in internship sites should be supplemented with reflective discussions through online forums. Doing this allows students to engage in collaborative learning to strengthen their workplace learning professional skills regardless of geographical locations and peculiarities of internship sites. However, students must be encouraged to demonstrate commitment to professional learning processes through alternative approaches, such as online discussion forums and informal peer engagements during the internship. In en-

hancing their workplace learning, students need to be open to learning from employees at internship sites while demonstrating a willingness to put theories into practice and seek assistance when required. Besides, they should embrace and practice critical reflective practices to help them determine appropriate skills to be prioritized for their personal, academic, and professional development.

Faculty organizing and coordinating internships need to intensify efforts in preparing students for the internship experience by organizing compulsory induction programs involving experienced faculty and professionals from outside the university to share experiences. In supporting students at the internship, educators must not subject students to a sink-or-swim situation. Consistent with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), they should allow students to explore and try out ideas learned at the university but should also be provided with assistance when necessary [35]. In online discussions to complement students' workplace learning, faculty serving academic supervisors should be actively involved by asking enriching questions and drawing students' attention to relevant theoretical or practical areas overlooked. Doing all this gives the impression that they are cared for and loved by those saddled with the responsibility of supporting their learning. Faculty also need to give heads up that there could be some issues, and students should not be apprehensive but seek help when confronted with some challenges. In addition, they should provide the internship sites' employees with information about students' backgrounds to determine appropriate ways to support them using personalized learning approaches. Employees providing internship support must be patient while helping students transition to other methods of completing professional tasks. Lastly, regular evaluations of soft skills required in work contexts will be essential as societies' and institutions' needs keep evolving.

The management and leadership team must also be actively involved in the enterprise to ensure adequate institutional support for strengthening students' workplace learning when necessary. For instance, they need to regularly encourage and support in providing funding to facilitate students' attendance at external training events with experienced professionals and entrepreneurs as facilitators. They also need to help facilitate the seamless process of bringing international experts, community leaders, and industry captains to the campus for intellectual engagements to complement the institution's efforts. Through the memorandum of understanding signed with many organizations and institutions, the management team can also assist in connecting faculty and internship organizers with potential internship sites, including government and private organizations.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

With its potential to complement the extant literature, the study has some limitations. For instance, students' data from one department in a college was drawn on with a total of sixty-five participants. The data collection was done through students' online forum participation and analyzed qualitatively. Although the study's goals were achieved by drawing on the data sets and using the qualitative research approach, generalization from the findings is practically impossible. Thus, future studies may involve more departments within a college or a university for more students' participation and comparative analysis. Future studies may also consider different data sets and research approaches, leading to triangulation. Lastly, future studies may evaluate the online discussion platform's impact on students' workplace learning experiences in the country.

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