

**15. What does learning to be professional
through the work placement experience mean?
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Lab technician at a fuel cell development firm**

Undertaking a year long work placement was one of the best decisions that I had ever made. I started out at the University of Surrey as an immature, hideaway but hardworking girl. Walking to lectures for the very first time, I was unsure of what my degree (BSc in chemistry) held for me. Before my placement year, I had attended two industry days and these involved final year students who had taken a placement year doing a poster presentation in the morning and answering questions from first and second year students, then in the afternoon, each student would have to give a PowerPoint presentation about their placement. I remember feeling excited about the prospect of taking a placement year and then coming back equipped with various skills and a new found confidence.

During my first two years at Surrey, as part of my course, I attended the laboratory to do practical work and although it was only once a week nonetheless I had always struggled to understand what I had to do, why I had to do it hence I struggled in the lab write ups. This was my underlying motivation to specifically choose a placement with plenty of lab work involved to improve my poor lab skills and knowledge. Searching and applying for placements were easy enough but when it came down to the interview, I had failed a few times. By this time (it was my second year and after Christmas, therefore, it was considered quite late in ngt having found a placement), I was beginning to despair.

At around that time, my interest in fuel cells was beginning to soar (due a coursework assignment wh)ch involved writing an essay about a type of fuel cell) and A asked one of my lecture2s for contacts within a fuel cell company. I sent off around six letters and CVs to the fuel c%lls com0anies and was warned thlt I may not get a reply, so I applied for other companies as a back up. A few weeks later, I received a reply from one company to say that they were not looking for placement students and another reply from a different fuel cell company inviting me for an interview. This company is a UK based developer of fuel cell stack for portable and small stationary generation applications. It took an enormous amount of preparation for the interview as I really wanted the placement and to stop looking for placements so I could spend more time in my studies, trying to get the best mark possible. I attended the interview and went away buzzing with excitement. After an anxious two weeks, came the email to offer me the role of a lab technician within the catalyst development group.

A few months later, I started my placement and after a nerve-wracking first couple of days, I settled in, learnt about how to run the experiments which provided information about a particular catalyst such as its activity, learnt some theory related to these experiments, learnt about how to carry these experiments out in a safe and responsible manner and learnt some data analysis (this was done using Microsoft Excel). Of course, these were all important s¾ills to learn, but I also learnt something which is of equal value if not more, that is, the importance of taking responsibility for getting to work on time (t(at is getting out of bed, washed, dressed and getting to work before nife o'clock for five days a week!) and learning to interact and socialise with my colleagues. After a wHile, my colleagues felt like they were part of my family as we saw so much of one another, we had to work together and we also went to social events such as going to the pub, going to the cinema, playing football and last September, our company entered a six people team for one of the region's largest annual charity races. Companies can enter teams of

six people and each person runs 1.7 miles in the form of a relay. It really was a memorable run and a great day.

In the first few months, I was experiencing the honeymoon period of my placement, there were so many highs and being given responsibility at work gives a boost of confidence and self importance. However, I had yet to experience a low – that is, the ugly nature of company politics. Initially I had moved into a flat with another student who had almost finished his year there and he arranged for his colleague to come to take me to work on my first day (as my flatmate had other plans and we could not travel to work together). Not only did his colleague drive me to work, he really took me under his wing, helped me with everything and made it seem like it was no trouble at all. Three months after starting my placement, he left partly due to the politics. I learnt a really important lesson there, that is, in every workplace; there will always be politics at the heart of it and to be very careful with company politics (it is wise not to mix and stir it up).

As part of my chemistry degree, my personal tutor had to come to the site to visit me three times during the placement year. I would do a technical PowerPoint presentation for him, my line manager and my colleague and afterwards there was a question and answer session. After the presentation itself, we would go for lunch and my tutor and I would have a one-to-one chat and then also with my line manager. Before taking the placement, I was always petrified of doing presentations and had little experience of doing solo PowerPoint presentations. In the first presentation, I was so nervous, my voice was faltering and my hands were slightly shaking. However, by my tutor's third visit, I felt that I had gained the confidence required to carry out a presentation and was no longer shaking.

Earning money and having so much more time (time which would usually be spent doing coursework and studying) felt brilliant. In the beginning, unfortunately I did not use all the spare time as well as I could (I would be sat in front of the television for most of the time and shopping spending my hard earned cash!). Soon I began to realise that this was a waste of my time and money and that I could use these more effectively so I began taking driving lessons every weekend. It did not come easily to me but I persevered and passed the theory test.

Unfortunately I took the practical test at the end of my placement and failed but I haven't given up on trying again. During this time, at one of the social events, I was talking to a colleague's boyfriend and he mentioned that they took pottery classes together at the local college one night a week. Taking classes and learning something new sounded really appealing so I applied to take a six week knitting class. I also had to pay for it but it was worth it and great fun as the knitting teacher taught really well and we (the class) gained a basic knowledge of how to cast on, how to purl, how to cast off and how to interpret and follow a pattern.

In the following term, I wanted to continue with the knitting classes and to take another course called world faith (the classes involve discussing different religions), however, due to a shortage of interest, both classes were cancelled. I decided to take classes in creative writing which sparked off inspiration as the teacher was writing her novel at that time and she would bring random but thought provoking ideas into the classes. It was very enjoyable and a great pleasure to be able to be part of the class.

During the year, I also managed to complete a four day first-aid at work course with the British Red Cross. The company gave me four days off work to go on the course and I thoroughly enjoyed it as there was an opportunity to both meet and work with people from different backgrounds. This course involved being placed in teams and working together to come up with

presentations such as concussion and the first aid treatment for it. During the course, we were also given different scenarios in which first aid is required.

Meanwhile at work, a colleague went on maternity leave and she also handled the stock, that is, ordering, organising and taking requests from other colleagues. I offered to take over while she was away and so I familiarised myself with the procedure, the stock from the suppliers' catalogues, how much stock to order, organising the storeroom when the delivery was made and checking that the right items were delivered. I really enjoy learning and taking responsibility for something else.

Although experiencing the working life felt great, it also felt tiring and hard work at times. Work means working and taking responsibilities from 9am-5.30pm Monday to Friday but being a student involves going to lectures, studying but getting more free time.

For me, learning to be professional through the work placement means learning to interact and build a good working relationship with my colleagues, learning a variety of things both in and outside of work, experiencing the working life and what it has to offer, gaining the lab skills which I had so desperately wanted, increasing self confidence, and maturing as a person. Now I am looking forward to this year's industry day where I will have the opportunity to talk to first and second year students about undertaking a placement year and how it has benefitted me and doing a PowerPoint presentation.

Undertaking a placement year has had a positive impact in terms of my final year project (I am better able to carry out independent lab work), my CV, hopefully my degree and it is the best start to the working life.