

Introduction

My first-year practical training experience was my first encounter with a job in the built environment. At the start of this journey, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect beyond the requirement to complete a certain number of hours working within the construction industry. Not knowing what specific skills I would gain, I kept an open mind and was not selective about the type of work or where I would be placed. Fortunately, I secured an internship at Motheo Academy in 2022, and the experience turned out to be more insightful and enriching than I had anticipated.

Overview of Motheo Academy and My Role

The nature of my internship at Motheo Academy was unique, as my role didn't fall within the ordinary scope of the academy's daily operations. This allowed me the freedom to explore various aspects of the organization, offering a broader learning experience. Motheo Academy typically focuses on training apprentices in trades like bricklaying, plumbing, and carpentry. They provide theoretical and practical education to ensure apprentices can pass their trade tests and transition into the construction industry. However, my placement didn't follow the typical apprenticeship route. Instead, I had the privilege of exploring different departments where I could learn the most, guided by my own interests and curiosity.

Upon my arrival at Motheo, I was greeted by Mr. Terrance Alexander, the project manager. His warm and enthusiastic reception immediately set a positive tone for my time at the academy. After introducing me to the small office team of about seven people, I was placed under the care of Mr. Henk, or "Uncle Henk," as everyone called him. Though strict and initially intimidating, Uncle Henk's leadership was key to the smooth functioning of the apprenticeship program. His tasks involved interviewing and shortlisting recruits, compiling progress reports on the apprentices, and managing the procurement of learning materials. In essence, he acted as the bridge between the office staff and the facilitators, who were responsible for the day-to-day education of the apprentices.

Apprenticeship Program at Motheo Academy

The apprenticeship program at Motheo Academy is designed to provide a holistic approach to learning, starting with theoretical education followed by practical assessments. Apprentices undergo training in essential construction skills, particularly in bricklaying, which is the core focus at Motheo. Facilitators work closely with the apprentices, teaching them the theoretical components and preparing them for their trade tests. Once the apprentices have completed their theory assessments, they move on to practical tasks, which involve constructing temporary structures at the academy to simulate real-world building conditions. The goal is to ensure that apprentices are fully equipped with both the theoretical knowledge and the hands-on experience necessary for success in the industry.

Another key aspect of the program is site experience. Apprentices are given the opportunity to work on actual construction sites, where they apply their skills in real-world scenarios. This site experience helps to bridge the gap between classroom learning and the challenges of working in the industry. Apprentices learn not just the technical skills but also the practical aspects of managing time, resources, and working as part of a construction team.

My Role in the Apprenticeship Program

My Role in the Apprenticeship Program My internship coincided with the final phase of the practical assessments for the first group of apprentices. I was introduced to the team of facilitators and handed over to Mr. Rhulani Baloyi, who led the first group of apprentices. Under his guidance, I was given the role of an assistant facilitator, which involved inspecting the temporary structures

that the apprentices built during their practical assessments. The inspection process was critical in evaluating the apprentices' ability to execute their theoretical knowledge into practice.

The purpose of inspecting these structures was to ensure that the apprentices followed the correct techniques and adhered to the required standards. After each inspection, we provided them with detailed feedback on their work. If the work was unsatisfactory, they were instructed to rebuild the structure, now with a better understanding of where they went wrong. This iterative process of learning through feedback and correction was highly effective in honing their skills.

Over the course of the week, I learned a great deal by shadowing the facilitators and inspecting the apprentices' work. The experience of watching how theory translated into practical tasks was invaluable. After this week of observation, I decided to invest in my own Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and join the apprentices in their practical work.

Learning Bricklaying and Construction Skills

Once I had my PPE, I began working alongside the apprentices, learning how to bricklay. To my surprise, I became quite skilled at the trade, thanks to the apprentices who were more than willing to teach me. The facilitators assigned me various tasks, and I found myself constructing different types of structures, such as paving, circular structures, one-brick walls, half-brick walls, cavity walls, blockwork, segmental arches, and stepped foundations. This hands-on experience was physically demanding, but the excitement of learning new skills made the effort worthwhile.

One of the most significant takeaways from this experience was seeing how the concepts I had learned in my Construction Technology 1 course came to life on site. For example, understanding the importance of accurate measurements and leveling in bricklaying helped me appreciate the precision required in construction. I also had the opportunity to learn how to use a dumpy level, a tool used for leveling ground, which later proved to be useful during my participation in the Community Build.

Participation in the Community Build

In September 2022, I attended a Community Build in Paarl. This was organized during the short vacation and was my first experience participating in such an initiative. Community builds are organized by the Department of Construction Economics and Management at UCT, and students are managed by the Association of Built Environment Students (ABES) executive committee members throughout the event. The community build involved working on the renovation of an existing structure. During the first few days, we focused on stripping the existing structures, removing fittings, and demolishing parts of the old screed. We were guided by Justin, a representative from Blue Moon Projects, who was instrumental in helping us understand the tasks and tools. It was during this phase that I first learned to use power tools, such as a jackhammer, to remove screed. I also picked up practical knowledge like removing a toilet, something I never imagined I would learn.

After three days of renovation work, my group moved on to foundation work. This involved setting out units for construction, soil testing, excavating, and surveying. My knowledge of the dumpy level came in handy here, as I was able to teach my classmates how to set it up and use it for surveying. We used the dumpy level to check the levels of the trenches we had dug, ensuring they were ready for the concrete pour.

Participating in the community build also gave me the opportunity to interact with older students in the same field. This was an invaluable networking experience, as I found mentors who were able to guide me through the rest of the academic year. It also gave me a better understanding of how to work on a large construction site with many moving parts, something I had not experienced before.

Reflection on Practical Training Experience

Overall, my first-year practical training experience was heavily oriented toward physical work, which I found to be a refreshing break from the theoretical focus of my coursework. The hands-on experience I gained at Motheo Academy and during the Community Build gave me a well-rounded view of the construction industry, encompassing both the practical and theoretical sides.

One of the most important lessons I learned is the value of applied knowledge. While theory forms the foundation of our education, it is through practical application that we truly understand the concepts and principles of construction. My time at Motheo Academy, in particular, was invaluable in helping me visualize and internalize the lessons from my Construction Technology 1 course. Additionally, the practical skills I learned, such as bricklaying, using a dumpy level, and working with power tools, are skills that I will carry with me throughout my career in construction.

The experience also reaffirmed my decision to pursue Construction Studies. By engaging with different facets of construction, from practical building techniques to site management and mentoring younger students, I gained a deeper appreciation for the diversity of roles within the built environment. This exposure has motivated me to continue my studies with a clearer vision of the career paths available to me.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my first-year practical training experience was both challenging and rewarding. It provided me with practical skills that complemented my academic learning, while also introducing me to the real-world demands of working in construction. My time at Motheo Academy and the Community Build gave me hands-on experience in bricklaying, surveying, and site management, all of which helped me grow as a student and as a future professional in the built environment. These experiences have left me eager to continue exploring the construction industry, and I look forward to applying what I have learned in future projects.