

Practice Based Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

Since the 1980s there has been significant growth in the engagement of higher education with workforce development, with among other things the emergence of a distinct if varied area of provision commonly referred to as practice-based learning. Recent examination of practice and literature indicates a growing sophistication in the way that practice-based learning is being theorised and facilitated in higher education, with its gradual emergence as a distinct field of practice and study supported by relevant pedagogies and concepts of curriculum. Tensions continue to exist between the demands and opportunities provided by the workplace and the need to develop capable practice, support personal development and maintain academic validity; however, universities are beginning to engage with these issues at a deeper level than that suggested by simple notions of employer engagement and skills development, and the evidence indicates that well-designed practice-based programmes are both effective and robust.

Introduction

Learning and Education Are Different

It must be recognised that learning and education are two distinct phenomena. Learning, often occurs as a result of education, but should not be confused with it. Education refers to the process, implemented by an educator or change agent, that is “designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals, groups or communities” and learning, which refers to the person who is changed, is defined as “the act or process by which behavioural change, knowledge, skills and attitudes are acquired” (Knowles *et al.*, 2005).

‘Practice-based’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘work-based’ learning. suggest that work-based learning brings together ‘universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces’. (Boud *et al.*, 2001)

Work-based learning is defined as incorporating a range and variety of student engagement with employers including industrial placement and live industry focused projects. (Ives *et al.*, 2005)

There is a very substantial role for the higher education sector in workplace learning and workforce development. Within this there is a need for types of involvement that are both immediately relevant at a practical level, while also engendering the kind of high-level learning that supports people as self-managing practitioners and self-directed learners. Against this background there has been growing involvement of universities in genuinely work-based learning, particularly in the UK both through response to government-backed initiatives such as the UK Employment Department’s work-based learning project of the early 1990s (Duckenfield & Stirner 1992) and the University for Industry’s Learning through Work initiative a decade later as well as through more organic development arising from interaction with industry, professions and individual professionals. The discussion that follows is grounded in experience at Middlesex University, one of the UK’s largest providers of work-based higher education, while also drawing on wider practice principally from the UK and Australia.

Work-Based Learning As University Practice

The development of negotiated work-based learning in higher education is part of an evolution from models concerned on the one hand with setting up and accrediting incompany courses and on the other with using the workplace as a vehicle for subject-specific learning (both legitimate practices in their own right), to the conception of an individual work-based ‘curriculum’ that grows out of the experience of the learner, their

work context and their community of practice (Nixon *et al* 2006). From this has emerged the idea of workbased learning as a transdisciplinary field that sits outside of subject-frameworks and has its own set of norms and practices (Costley & Armsby 2007).

As work-based learning in this transdisciplinary sense ‘departs substantially from the disciplinary framework of university study’ (Boud 2001) it needs to be accompanied by appropriate methodologies and practices for organising individual programmes of learning, recognising existing skills and understanding, and supporting and assessing learners. Over the last fifteen years or so the expansion of negotiated work-based learning has led to the development of a distinct pedagogical approach that at a practical level can be summarised as consisting of four main components, all of which are imbued with a strong ethos of reflexivity and practitioner enquiry:

1. Individual (or part-individual and part-group) programmes that are negotiated around a learning contract or agreement
2. Recognition of previous learning, both for credit and as the starting-point for the programme
3. The use of live, methodologically-sound projects and practitioner research, backed by appropriate forms of learner support
4. Valid forms of assessment, normally referenced to generic criteria representing the relevant academic level.

An unpublished 2008 survey of work-based learning staff at Middlesex University indicated that research is embedded into programmes both by the teaching of appropriate methodologies and, more centrally, through a ‘curriculum’ that is designed around active investigation and enquiry rather than the acquisition of specific content. Using the typology provided by Griffiths (2004) for linking teaching and research, work-based learning therefore appears most strongly *research-based* and *research-oriented*; it is also to an extent *research-informed*, where staff use appropriate pedagogical research to inform their own practices.

Except where it is working within specific professional disciplines it is much less likely to be *research-led* in the traditional sense, i.e. where the research interests of staff inform student learning.

Work-based learning programmes generally require a different set of practices for learning facilitation and learner support than are appropriate to taught programmes or conventional research degrees. The role of the tutor often moves on the one hand from being a teacher to being both a facilitator and an expert resource, and on the other from supervisor to advisor or “academic consultant”. The role of the work-based learning tutor can be varied and extensive, and experience from several British and Australian universities involved in workbased learning suggests that activities will include:

1. helping learners to become active in identifying their needs and aspirations and managing the learning process acting as a process consultant
2. helping learners develop their abilities of critical reflection and enquiry helping learners identify and work with ethical issues helping learners make effective use of workplace resources
3. developing learners’ academic skills and helping them use them in the workplace
4. providing specialist expertise

While few if any of these are specific to work-based learning, taken together they suggest a move from an expert or delivery model of higher education to a partnership or facilitative one (Harvey 2007). Finally, there is a need to assess work-based learning through methods that are adequate, valid, and avoid undermining the nature of the learning, given that it will typically be issuebased, driven by the learner, and transdisciplinary. The aim of assessment is generally to assess learners’ progress as ‘map-makers’ or self-managing practitioners, not to confirm their conformance as ‘mapreaders’ i.e. their mastery of propositional knowledge or ability to demonstrate occupational competence. Its focus is typically concerned with learners’

reasoning and critical reflection, how they develop their capability as practitioners and practitioner-researchers, and how they make critical judgements in the work context. The technicalities of this are commonly supported through generic level statements and criteria such as those developed for the *Learning through Work* initiative, coupled with individual learning outcomes and sometimes assessment criteria that are negotiated as part of the learning agreement and reflect the kinds of social, cultural and contextual knowledge and skills that are used in the workplace. (Stan Lester & Carol Costley, 2010)

The key benefits of an effective Work-based Learning programme for students

- Links academic study and theory to real industrial practice.
- Raises self-confidence and the development of transferable skills.
- Learning at work allows employed students to develop skills and knowledge with minimal loss of personal time or workplace time.
- Encourages reflective learning and self development.
- Enhances professional development and future career paths.
- Equips students with management and decision-making skills.
- Engagement in the processes, systems, technology and language of industry. (Martine Duggan, 2011)

Example for such programme

The University of the Arts London is host to the Creative Learning in Practice Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CLIP CETL), which has funded a number of small course-based evaluative and developmental projects. These projects have been designed by course tutors in conjunction with the CLIP CETL team, who are evaluating them to better understand and extend the pedagogies of practice-based teaching and learning. Practice-based learning is a way of conceptualising and organising student learning which can be used in many applied disciplinary contexts. The impact of work-based programmes on organisations appears to stem from three areas. The most immediate of these is in the value of the work-based project itself and the skills and changes that it brings with it. Projects can result in knowledge creation that adds to the organisation's intellectual or structural capital (Garnett 2007), increasing its overall capability. Secondly the broader development of learners can also have an impact through their increased professionalism and motivation, particularly if this can be capitalised upon through their development and roles within the organisation. Finally, work-based programmes can have wider impact through bringing about organisational change or changes to ways of working, identifying new directions for a business, or gaining external recognition and prestige; these are often outcomes associated with postgraduate and particularly doctoral programmes (e.g. Costley & Stephenson 2008), but they can grow out of undergraduate programmes as well.

Conclusion

The students can be benefited through inaugurating practice based programmes and centre in colleges. A strategic and balanced approach to practice based learning is required to fully realise its potential to enhance employability, develop the workforce and balance individual and organisational needs. It is recommended that a community of practice with flexible structures and practices characterised by effective communication and lifelong learning be fostered in order to enhance workforce development, maximise the benefits of practice-based learning and balance individual and organisational needs.

References

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