

Developing Reflective Practice in Professional Life

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1. Introduction

This report reviews an innovative Work-Based Learning (WBL) programme, based in a University context. The scheme enables professionals to develop new skills within a working context in partnership with their employers in both SMEs and large organisations. The employers participate in the design and delivery of several types of provision, which give the students flexible entry and exit at several levels of accredited awards: Certificate, Bachelor's Degree, Diploma and Masters level engagement. The University in turn provides the input of a full-time academic, with one-to-one support on campus and on site.

The highest level of award, the Masters Degree, presents perhaps the greatest challenge for the tutor in terms of measuring and assessing the real value of the programme. This report examines this issue, using as its main sources of evidence the students' and employers' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of reflective practice in relation to professional development in a Work-Based Learning context. This report will attempt to answer the following research question: have the participants of the programme become more reflective as a result of their Work-Based Learning experience?

The concept of Work-Based Learning has hitherto received a lot of contradictory interpretations. Among researchers, some perceive learning to be only that activity which takes place in formal settings, while others assess incidental learning (learning which takes place as part of one's daily routine), to be of equal importance and value. A particular emphasis is placed on the participants' capacity to engage successfully in reflective practice, before, during and after the completion of the programme. One fundamental complaint in relation to contemporary society is how heavily institutionalised most of us feel within our working contexts. Very frequently, both the significance and value of our day-to-day actions escapes us due to the exercise of rapid operational rhythms. Thus the opportunities for engaging in a deliberate process of reflection are narrowing. I would argue that Work-Based Learning and reflective practise should be viewed as closely related and complementary processes. If Work-Based Learning is to mean anything, then it has to involve changing the ways that the workplace and the work experience are commonly perceived and regarded. We must try to get beyond the traditional notions of work, workplace and the value of the work experience. I often feel that a function and emotion isn't validated, or a moment real until deliberately reflected upon. The report concludes with an outline of the next stage of the review which is designed to focus on assessment techniques for onsite evaluation of the technical and higher level skills which the Masters programme also aims to develop.

2. Background/Context

In recent years, UK Universities have been encouraged to "reach out" to the business community by being invited to boost their funding through the government funded Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community Fund (HEROBC, www.hefc.ac.uk/Reachout/herobc.htm). This programme is designed to increase University-

Community links. Industry is continuously changing and new methods of manufacturing production demand that employees exercise greater individual responsibility and autonomy as well as flexibility and adaptability in their working context. There is generally uncertainty over what defines and is included in the Work-Based Learning term. Everyday understanding suggests that Work-Based Learning is learning in, from, through, to and at work. Mezirow 1991, classifies workplace learning into three forms.

- Instrumental learning focuses on learning aimed at skill development and improving productivity.
- Dialogic learning involves learning about the individual's organisation and their place in it.
- Self-reflective learning is described as learning which promotes an understanding of oneself in the workplace and provokes questions about one's identity and the need for self-change, involving a transformation of the way a person looks at self and relationships.

All three domains are integrated when learners become sensitive to why things are being done in a particular way, and critically reflective before accepting given solutions to problems or methods of practice. Mezirow conceptualises transformative learning as development through challenging old assumptions and creating new meanings that are 'more inclusive, integrative, discriminating and open to alternative points of view'.

Work-Based Learning can provide opportunities to develop these necessary skills and as a WBL Co-ordinator in the University sector, it is a prime concern of mine to identify the most productive knowledge, training and development as key sources of sustainable advantage for the participants. Learning *at, from, through* and *for* work is the essential definition of WBL and its unique feature is that it exploits the University's expertise in professional development and academic expertise in partnership with a working context that situates the learning and provides practical support.

Though Work-Based Learning can develop the learner's already acquired industrial and /or academic knowledge, it can be particularly transformative in relation to those for whom the overwhelming focus of their experience has been the factual or numerical outcome. To date I have found that the majority of the students taking part in the Masters programme have come from a science/engineering background and have relatively specific roles to play in their organizations. However a key feature of the process, reflective learning and practice, appears to prove confusing for many of them, not only in terms of its literal function (i.e. how does this "thing" work?) but also in terms of its perceived value to their professional lives. To add to the problem, the employers frequently send the mixed message of blessing the academic involvement in assisting the technology transfer role but not being able to commit to change the very institutionalised context within which they have been operating. In order to appreciate and in turn make use of the value of such skills as negotiation, reflection and active involvement and participation of general human resources, I feel that it is necessary actively to replace the traditionally established top-down approach which most organizations continue to espouse.

In tandem with the latter, I have found that the Masters students who join the Work-Based Learning programme are generally not used to recognising areas of "greyness" in their professional practice i.e. they often have a mindset which views evaluation and improvement narrowly in terms of success or failure, which usually characterises industrial product testing rather than processes of continuous improvement. This type of approach militates against reflective practice which is generally more suited to viewing improvement and skill development as processes of refinement.

Another dimension of the context in which the programme is placed is the comparatively recent recognition by both Universities and commercial/industrial settings that the partnership has many benefits. To take one example, it is possible for the University side of the partnership objectively to identify bad habits which otherwise become consolidated in organisations in which the working rhythms do not allow for such awareness. This in turn raises the issue "if a problem is not recognised as a problem is it a problem at all?" i.e. the organisation, and in particular its employees in Work-Based Learning programmes, may not, initially at least, be able to identify problems that are amenable to resolution through reflection and improved practice.

It is therefore one of the programme's major goals that the concept of reflective practice will gradually promote the participants' understanding of their roles in the workplace and provoke questions about their identity and the need for self change. In essence participation in the programme demands that each person transforms the way a person looks at themselves and their relationships.

As an academic myself I had observed over a period of time that despite my good intentions, no tangible evidence remained at the end of the process as proof of change in terms of the participants' approach to their working and/or personal lives. The frustration was increasing when I soon realised that there was no specific mechanism in place to monitor any changes and that even if these modifications were indeed occurring they would have probably entirely bypassed me since I was only vaguely aware of what I was looking for though convinced that the entire programme had to be more meaningful!

Most of the participants in the Work-Based Learning Masters programme gained a place almost as a bonus by the already established partnership of the University and the organisation, therefore any financial commitment was substantially covered by the two partner institutions (i.e. workplace/University), thus leaving the individual participants free from any money worries. Evidently helpful as this might be to any student, I couldn't help noticing over time that such a facility was almost entirely taken for granted by the recipients (employees/students) who started viewing the entire programme as a "freebie" rather than a challenging educational experience which after all was what I intended it to be!

As part of our structured learning sessions, I frequently encouraged the participants to volunteer information on the applicability of the newly (through the Masters programme) acquired skills to their workplace, or, indeed, their own thoughts on how much of this programme (learning was actually affecting themselves in their day to day routinely exercised activities. This was done through a variety of means (i.e. discussions, written exercises, group work etc..). The responses for quite a while were uninspiring. The students continued to view the programme as an entirely distinct part of their lives which,

sad as it was, I could cope easier with, rather than the fact that they were also seeing no need to make it part of it. It was fine left alone!

On reflection, I have to confirm that my biggest desire was for myself to come out of the self-blame culture which was undoubtedly destructive for all stakeholders involved through identifying means whereby my students would recognise the evident (until then only to me!) links of the programme to their professional and personal lives in a way which would help me to improve my working practice and assist encourage the participants of the programme in doing the same.

3. Methodology

After careful consideration of the objectives of the review, an action research approach was chosen as the most appropriate method. One of the key features of the review was to identify ways for the tutor to promote reflective practice through developing opportunities for the participants of the programme to improve their work. This reciprocal involvement and relationship of people is best served by an action research methodology. Though the results of this piece of work are going to be of significant value and importance, the emphasis of the exercise is generally placed upon the process and what the latter teaches, both to the researcher and the students (participants), in order to best inform current and future practice. This type of research does not by its nature involve a product as such, rather it is people-centred. However, as explained earlier, any changes which are generated can be viewed as the products of this research.

The Action Research Process

As a first step in setting up the programme and designing its parallel evaluation through action research, it was necessary to engage in a substantial period of reading and research in order to understand the underpinning Work-Based Learning research and assessment methods and appropriate industrial working practices. This accomplished, the second step was to consult with other academic colleagues about possible ways to engage the students in active reflective practice. Three questions were identified to provide a focus for developing new ideas and practices:

- Why would professional students need to reflect?
- Why are reflective employees useful to employers and themselves?
- What is the best way to develop routine reflective practice?

These questions guided the development of the programme which at the time of writing has thirty students, all employees of professional organisations or SMEs.

The data for the research included observations from visits made to the students in their workplaces (on three occasions each) and narrative records kept by the students themselves. These latter data comprised a learning journal (diary) which was kept over the course of the academic year. The journal was divided in two sections:

"What happened (diary of events)?" and "What did I learn?".

The students were encouraged to record in this diary any events which were of significance to them as individuals, both in their workplace and in the University, adding a third section in which they could record an answer to the question:

"Would any of these issues have been overlooked if I wasn't undertaking this programme?"

The initial assessments of the students' work and journals quickly revealed the extent of reflective practice the students had accomplished. In order to focus on the development of such skills, six of the students, (two from each year) with the least capacity for reflective practice were selected for further observation.

In order to promote reflection on the whole programme, the participants were asked to furnish a written separate section on their "own reflections". This turned out to be a very revealing part of the research where most of the students demonstrated unfamiliarity with the process and importance of self-assessment. To probe this aspect of the work, participants were encouraged to view this section as reflections on their journal work and to divide it equally in two sub categories: "What reflective judgement means to me now?" (the *before* question) and "What changed?" (the *after* answer).

A series of semi-structured interviews, four sessions with each student, were organised to enable a range of issues to be addressed i.e: "Do you feel that the Work-Based Learning programme has enabled you to make your learning at work explicit?" If the response was affirmative, the respondents were probed as to whether they had engaged in a process of deliberate reflection and analysis. If not, they were asked to comment on why this was so. The students were also asked to concentrate on those areas of their work in which they needed to focus in order to improve their personal and working lives.

I found that the introduction of this type of work which incorporates learning journals and diaries with relevant structured sections, contributes and encourages reflective learning and practice; thus enhancing the learning experience for all of the participants of the programme, students and tutor.

Invariably the students feel that although no workplace challenges can be predicted their own capacity to cope with the "unknown" was significantly increased through learning to ask more of the right questions about the processes, and seeking constant reflection before, during and after the event. The course encouraged and enabled the students to engage actively in their own action research through developing their capacity to engage critically in the exercise of reflection.

Assuring the Fairness and Accuracy of the Judgements

At the beginning of the research, two validation groups were set up- one comprising the students (as research participants) and the other comprising three academic colleagues and a critical friend (the latter being the term used in action research to describe a person who is in a close academic and physical proximity to the researcher and who provides advice on,

encouragement and validation of the research, thus offering invaluable commentary to the researcher).

How was the Process of the Programme Modified by the Research?

The students were introduced to a method of self evaluation and assessment which gave them an opportunity to show what they own as knowledge, what they have learnt (as a result of their work), what they can do in the future to improve, and how they appreciated their own learning experiences through a process of reflective practice. Jarvis defines "Reflective Learning" as a process which includes contemplation, reflective skills and experimental learning.

Through this the participants were offered the opportunity to view unresolved situations not as "failures" but as learning challenges and stepping stones of knowledge for the future. This enabled them to celebrate their current efforts and achievements as opposed to lamenting inevitable "losses".

Employers participated in their employees' learning and their own learning through actively engaging them in the above described process. A shift in the mindsets of employers and employees was evident and is illustrated by the following selection of comments made:

"Work-Based Learning fits very well with the 'Investors in People' philosophy of developing individuals within the context of organisational aims." (Employer)

"This project has provided me with a greater understanding of the organisation, the products it manufactures and the environment it operates in." (Employee)

"It allowed me to negotiate the areas I wished to study. I was easily motivated to do work for this course." (Employee)

"Had this project been conducted outside the work-based learning module, I might not have carried out such extensive background reading and research, and a number of important issues could have been overlooked." (Employee)

"This work gave me the opportunity to think about the overall team effort in my organisation instead of focusing only on my own functional area." (Employee)

4. Conclusion

The research reflects the changing nature of the socio-economic and political significance of Work-Based Learning, which can be understood in the context of the needs of the learning economy and the related global policy initiatives for Lifelong Learning. It has raised also important new questions such as:

- Can one assume that lack of reflective practice is exclusively associated with technical professions?
- Does specific "product marketing" in industry require "before", "during" and "after" reflective activity?
- Do more career pathways "open up" to technical profession employees who actively engage in reflective practice?

Both Kolb and Eraut discuss the phenomenon of "situational knowledge". Undoubtedly, both the instigators of the concept as well as the recipients had a lot to learn from this innovative project. The following section indicates some of this learning.

Reflections of the Author on the Importance of the Research

For the Researcher

I believe that the research has achieved what it set out to do, which was to evidence the lack and need for reflective practice in professionals. I have now become aware of the paramount need to be self-reflective in the course of encouraging students to engage in reflective evaluation. At first I tended to approach the students on an individual basis, attempting to appreciate the nature of their respective projects, and to make them all individually aware of the need to become more familiar with the conceptual tools of the social sciences. However, I began to appreciate the need to consider the group and the course as a whole, and to try myself to make more explicit connections between the different students' learning experiences. I came to appreciate that there was a danger of the teaching context being too dependent on the particularities of the individual projects. Following my advice to them all to make connections between different types of knowledge and learning, I too needed to construct a clearer conceptual vision of the programme. To this end I felt that the question of my own self-reflection and need to make connections would be central. Thus, I tried to draw more thoughtful comparisons between the issues and problems which arose in each case, and to use the experience acquired in evaluating the first case to inform my evaluation of the second and so on.

For the Workplace

As a co-ordinator of the area of Work-Based Learning in my University, it is very important that the field will be continuously developed, improved and critically analysed against the needs and demands of the people who avail of its educational, experiential and learning theories. I believe that this piece of research is compatible with the above values.

For Education

The results of my work cannot be considered to be the final analysis and will constantly be subject to alterations, changes and modifications with the ultimate aim of continuous improvement of my working practice. My colleagues in the area of Work-Based Learning in the University have agreed to look into the following issues, resulting from the research, as topics to be actively incorporated in the teaching of the Work-Based Learning programme from the next academic year (2002-2003). Participants will be asked to:

- analyse critically a work-related situation or theme to a negotiated brief using appropriate methods;
- solve pertinent structured problems both individually and, if appropriate, in groups;
- report on learning achieved through the project, in an appropriate reporting style;
- make recommendations and/or suggest guidelines for change, based on project findings;
- reflect critically on experience and/or practice;
- research and critically evaluate relevant information independently;
- plan and implement personal transferable skills objectives for improving their own learning and performance.

I feel that this approach will fully address the need for University-based education to assist professionals to engage actively in all aspects of reflective learning and practice and ultimately to achieve a culture change in which they have the skills to adapt and cope with issues as they arise.

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