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How tutor views, beliefs and perceptions contribute to successful learning for work-based students in higher education (0107)

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Sam left school at age 16 and joined HE some 12 years later as a mature student studying for an education-related Foundation degree. She successfully completed her Foundation degree, an honours 'top-up', gained Qualified Teacher Status and is now working as a primary school teacher. Although there are many and varied factors relating to Sam's success in higher education, this paper suggests that the tutor has a crucial role in supporting students such as Sam. In particular, tutor effectiveness in supporting work-based students can be scrutinised in three areas: the tutor's view of the legitimacy of work-based learning as a valid pedagogy; the tutor's beliefs regarding ability; and the tutor's perception of their role on a continuum from knowledge transmission to learning facilitation.

How tutor views, beliefs and perceptions contribute to successful learning for work-based students in higher education

Background

The context for this paper is a work-based Foundation degree (Fd) in Educational Studies for Teaching Assistants at Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln (BG). Foundation degrees are situated at level five of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA 2008) and feature the integration of academic study and work-based learning as a central part of course design and delivery (QAA 2004, DfES 2004a). Boud, Solomon and Symes (2001) use the term 'work-based learning' to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations in partnership, in order to create new learning opportunities in the workplace within the context of higher education study. Within the Fd model, knowledge gained in the workplace is used not only to enhance workplace practice, but is also used as a basis for the development of degree-level skills such as critical analysis, evaluation, problem-solving and reflection.

Meet Sam

Sam was 28 years old when she began her Fd studies at BG. She had gained a reasonable spread of GCSE passes at school, and then went to hairdressing college for a year and a half. Following this, Sam got married, had children and combined home life with work in nursing homes and hospitals. It was a point of crisis in her life and changes in her personal circumstances (illness, separation, then divorce) that caused Sam to reconsider her future. She decided to do something with her life, '*before it was too late*'. At that time, Sam was working as a primary school teaching assistant and was

inspired, through observing a colleague, to consider a career within teaching. This led her to being accepted onto the Fd at BG and to being part of a longitudinal case study that followed students through their studies and captured their experiences through interviews and diary entries.

Data collected from Sam revealed that she was constantly plagued with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, particularly in relation to how she viewed herself academically and intellectually, as shown in this diary entry, written soon after she began her studies:

To even apply to university was a big step for me, let alone getting in. The first day at college I was really nervous. I was excited but I worried about what to expect. Was I clever enough to complete a degree? Was I just kidding myself? What if I don't understand what they're talking about? These were just a few of the thoughts going through my head.

However, despite these worries and clearly delineated self-theories related to her ability (Dweck 2000) (which recurred throughout her first year of study in particular) Sam achieved her Foundation degree and progressed to the final year of an honours course with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). At her Fd graduation, she said: *I now believe in myself whereas when I first started...I didn't particularly think I could do it.* Now, Sam is a primary school teacher and she has even talked about continuing to master's level study in the future.

What enabled Sam to succeed?

Although there are many and varied factors relating to Sam's success (for example, the support of her family and the flexibility of the workplace in providing additional practical experience relevant to the course are indicated in the data as significant factors), it seems that the tutor has a crucial role in supporting students such as Sam. In particular, tutor effectiveness in supporting work-based students can be scrutinised in three areas, discussed next.

The tutor's view of the legitimacy of work-based learning as a valid pedagogy

In order for students to flourish on work-based courses, the tutor must be committed to work-based learning as a legitimate mode of study. Yet, this is not as straightforward as it seems. To embrace work-based learning means a reconsideration of both the nature of knowledge and its site of production. In practice, this means accepting that knowledge has moved from being an abstract notion and the exclusive privilege of the intellectual elite, to becoming a fragmented commodity, relevant to specific settings and situations (Lyotard 1984; Delanty 2001). Furthermore, in a work-based course situated within higher education, the workplace becomes a potential site of knowledge production, alongside the university (Tennant 2000; Boud 2001). Therefore, the work-based learner can bring with them to the university setting knowledge specific to their workplace – thus contributing from the outset in terms of knowledge production. Only by accepting these two fundamental shifts in

how knowledge is viewed and produced can a work-based learning pedagogy attain legitimacy and become a positive enabler of learning for the student.

The tutor's beliefs regarding ability

If a tutor accepts work-based learning as a legitimate mode of study, then in order to fully free students to learn effectively the point at which a tutor is situated along the 'fixed to malleable' continuum in terms of beliefs regarding ability may dictate the nature and level of support they offer to a student. A tutor situated towards the fixed end of the fixed-malleable continuum would be in danger of imposing a severe inhibitor upon student achievement – particularly if they reinforced a student's self-theory that tended towards a fixed view, as in Sam's case. Fortunately for Sam, her tutor held a malleable view of ability and sought to support Sam to move along the continuum in order to avoid a tendency towards learned helplessness (Dweck 2000).

The tutor's perception of their role on a continuum from knowledge transmission to learning facilitation

I have already suggested the importance of viewing knowledge within work-based courses as a commodity, rather than an abstract notion, yet a key role for the tutor is to help the learner to move beyond the immediate context to transform and reinvent knowledge in different contexts (Fenwick 2000, Boud 2001). This is dependent upon the tutor's dispositional attitude towards different types of knowledge; the role they perceive for themselves in terms of being a knowledge transmitter or learning facilitator; and their skill in integrating stands of knowledge across subject-based and practical/professionally-based boundaries. In addition, the tutor is charged with recognising the links between experience and abstract ideas within the learning process (Kolb 1984) and in supporting the student in developing a reflective approach to make sense of such links (Moon 1999). Therefore, where the tutor's role is placed along the continuum between acting as knowledge transmitter and learning facilitator could inhibit or enhance the student's learning. If the tutor takes on a facilitative role, effective learning becomes possible for the student, as the tutor becomes less interested in checking knowledge and more concerned with helping the student make sense of what they bring to their learning.

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