

# **Coherency, flexibility and connectedness in work-based learning: an action research study to evaluate, develop and disseminate innovations designed to enhance students' work-based learning. (0025)**

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## **Introduction**

Within the study of learning in higher education the role of the placement is well established within Initial Teacher Education. However, within Bachelor of Arts degrees, such as Education Studies and Early Childhood Studies, the role of work experience and the learning undertaken within, is less clearly defined. Without the pressure of OFSTED inspections there is greater scope for creativity and flexibility in designing provision.

The tutor team was keen to move away from instrumental conceptualisations of placement learning and instead to deepen connections between personal experience, employment and knowledge through utilising auto ethnographic methods. A systematic evaluation of these innovations has been completed which investigated the extent to which they enrich students' knowledge, creativity and practical skills. In this paper the tutor team outline the changes they introduced, discuss the rationale behind the changes and reflect on data collected during the evaluation of the project.

## **Background**

The BA Education Studies degree programme at the University of Plymouth supports two modules, one taken by all second year students and one option module in the third year. Students are assessed by coursework rather than by performance on placement and are required to undertake fifty hours in either a voluntary or paid work setting of their choice. Many students (about half) choose to work in schools or other education organisations.

In 2007 the academic content of the modules was revised. The tutor team's approach was informed by theories of learning such as those outlined in the field of adult education (Knowles, 1984); experiential education (Kolb, 1984) and research into the student experience (Laurillard, 1993). Underpinning the redesign of the modules were 3 primary intentions.

1. To strengthen links between the students' academic knowledge and graduate employability.
2. To introduce students to literature on the social practices of learning within organisations (e.g. Causey, Thomas and Armento, 1999; Eraut & Hirsh, 2007).
3. To introduce students to the skills and knowledge for researching and evaluating learning in the work-place (e.g. Woods & Henderson, 2002; Evans, Hodgkinson, Rainbird and Unwin, 2006).

The aim was to create a shift in student's academic writing from a discourse of personal reflection to a research oriented approach and to develop criticality.

Students are required to analyse their own learning within the context and to draw connections to relevant literature. The pedagogical approach emphasised autonomy through blended learning elements such as online discussions, e-newsletters and online tutoring but also provided scaffolding through individual tutorials, structured reading workshops and carefully designed resources.

In 2009 a systematic evaluation was begun of these pedagogical innovations. The project aimed to ascertain the impact of the pedagogical approach to further enhance delivery and disseminate good practice.

### **Research methods**

The evaluation consisted of a series of data collection activities. Interviews were carried out with a small number of current students from each of the two modules to help generate questions for a survey and contribute qualitative data on their experience of the modules. From the information gained from these interviews a web-based survey (using Pegasus) was carried out involving students enrolled on the modules in 2007/08 and 2008/09. The questions were designed to gauge the effects of the module on their understandings of learning and practices in the work place and more widely.

The student survey and interview data was discussed by the project team, and then analysed individually by looking for references that indicated changes to the students' practical and content knowledge, the extent of their engagement in their own learning and the efficacy of the teaching practices. These findings were cross referenced against the three identified themes of "coherency", "connectedness" and "flexibility" in work-based learning.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Coherency**

Overall, our data suggest the students develop rich understandings of work-based learning and derive personal meaning from their placement experiences through re-searching their own learning with the support provided by tutors. The curricular changes are supporting them with the application of theory to practice, which has important consequences for their lives beyond the university programme.

### **Flexibility**

The flexible delivery of the module provides multiple opportunities for personal choice, and is particularly valuable for those already motivated in their study or work. There is some risk for those less motivated. The current online delivery is regarded as satisfactory, and a useful resource, but the students suggest it does not take the place of pedagogical work in face to face workshops and tutorial time. These findings suggest that more coherent links may need to be made between the online resources and face to face delivery. For example tutors could better structure and scaffold learning, making more use of the online materials in face-to-face teaching

### **Connectedness**

There are many different ways that students are finding connectedness in the modules. Students are making connections between their work experience and their

academic study by drawing upon knowledge from other modules, utilising the theories of work-based learning in the workplace and the experience is leading them into further study. The modules are supporting future employability by enabling some students to try out new areas of work or gain additional experience in a field of interest. The modules are also enabling students to utilise prior or existing work contacts or situations, which is especially valuable for those who enter the programme already in employment.

### **Coda**

The project has already led to some positive changes for students. One particular example lies in how tutors have supported students in accessing academic literature to deepen, contextualise and theorise their practical experiences. This has been achieved through small group workshops using structured reading activities which encourage students to draw connections to their personal experiences and theories of learning within the workplace. There has also been more tutor input on auto-ethnographic research and writing. More work is needed to facilitate the blended learning developments. The findings suggest whilst students find our innovations challenging, they recognise their value when they fully engage with them. These findings will be discussed with employers and students, to improve our support of learning and further refine the work-based learning modules.

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