Work-based learning and student agency: developing strategic learners

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Abstract

This paper will propose that a new approach to work-based pedagogy is required to enable mobile learners – often negotiating various physical, social and virtual learning environments – to develop greater personal agency and subsequent control over their Higher Education (HE) experience. A relatively new group of employer-sponsored, Foundation degree (Fd) students will be the focus of discussion, though it is hoped that issues raised are of wider relevance. Themes from ongoing research will offer perspectives on the importance of identity, purpose and relationships to students of health and social care, who have potential to become more strategic in their approach to learning.

Context

Foundation degrees were introduced in 2001 to upskill the workforce and widen access to HE (DfES, 2003). In healthcare, employers access the qualification to support the development of new roles. This is fuelling the demand for learning in the workplace, often supported by on-line materials. HE and FE providers remain responsible for delivering quality standards and student satisfaction, while preparing non-traditional entrants for academic success and progression into Honours programmes (HEFCE, 2000). Innovative approaches are therefore needed to bring these agendas together successfully; that is, approaches which go beyond routine consultation with employers.

A deeper understanding of how this employer-sponsored group of students make use of *all* their learning opportunities is necessary if they are to cope and thrive. Of particular interest are the ways in which they translate their educational requirements into work activities, and in turn utilise their experiential learning at work to develop academic ability. Freedom from the somewhat restrictive features of traditional, professional healthcare programmes means more expansive approaches can be incorporated into programme design. Expansive curricula include broader experiences across workplaces, engagement with multiple communities of practice, access to career progression and scope to extend roles, as described by Fuller & Unwin (2003). Such creative and exciting possibilities must be balanced though, with the reality of juggling family life, work and HE study.

Research findings: places and people

This paper draws upon related aspects of two of the authors' current pedagogic research studies, to illustrate two different aspects of agency: a sense of moral identity and a sense of belonging. In the first study, the importance of feedback from service users, carers and workplace colleagues emerges as critical to participants' sense of moral identity. Discourse analysis reveals these three groups to be

the most frequently discussed in relation to self, decision-making and development of reasoning and judgement skills. Actions are reflected upon as 'right' in light of positive responses from those receiving care or support. The detailed recollection of interactions suggests a sense of moral proximity, which contributes to an identity not professionally-constructed but explained through personal experience: *'I remember when my mother was ill and trying to get treatment for her'.* Users and carers appear to be part of a community of practice, providing not only a place to learn, but 'a context for new insights to be transformed into knowledge' (Wenger, 1998:214).

In the second study, graduates reflect upon their changing sense of self, as worker and learner. Findings indicate that one of the ways in which students become active participants of social communities is through the informal formation of peer support groups. However, their dual identity can be challenged, incurring a need to negotiate a new sense of belonging and legitimacy within a work-related social community. A degree of role-confusion was expressed: *'I'm here to be a student, well, when I'm at work I'm the manager so I couldn't really be a student, you know'.* Yet our expectation as educators is that these roles co-exist for Foundation degree students.

Both studies highlight participants' reliance upon service users / carers, colleagues and line-managers for exposure to, and reflection upon, learning opportunities. While Virtual Learning Environments can provide continuity and scope to share resources, students in the second study reported needing a good deal of support to fully exploit this medium. Ashton (2004) found the most junior workers to be vulnerable to exclusion from networks and knowledge, raising the issue of how this group of students gain access to both during their working-learning lives.

A new approach to pedagogy: mobile learners as strategists and agents

To seek to work with employers, without reassessing the needs of the employed student, risks perpetuating myths regarding the benefits of work-based learning. Students report being motivated by a 'clear purpose and direction in life', above technical skill (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004:115), suggesting time invested in developing goals is well spent. However personal agency requires not only purpose, but knowledge of processes, cultures and norms, in order to influence relationships and access learning opportunities. Easily accessible information about entitlements, risks, rules – and when these change – is essential to students, as needed. Working students, with little time to waste, require strategic approaches to study: organising time and study methods, understanding assessment, self-regulating effort and developing meta-cognition (Entwhistle, 2000). It is unusual though, for such approaches to be explicitly encouraged and facilitated; students described taking many months or even years to work this out.

The third, and newest study, is a collaboration involving students and employers in a joint development of a work based learning module. Its goal is to learn broader lessons about developing curricula and virtual resources in collaboration with employers, through the inclusion of the learner voice at all stages of the project. Students are included in all curriculum development and implementation alongside academics and employers. In this way the curriculum is co-constructed and all three stakeholders have a better understanding of the learning objectives which will result. It is hoped, that in this way, the learner voice will be captured at the development stage and this will lead to a better understanding of the competing demands on the students' time during the module by the academics and employers. By making explicit the role of agency and strategic learning, it is hoped that all contributors will generate ideas and learn from each other. In this paper, the authors will share some of the early findings of the study.

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