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**"The Student Experience of Social Learning: An Evaluation of Pedagogical Approaches to Work-Based Learning" by Hannah Smith, Ruth Boyask, Cath Gristy and Anne McKay.**

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**Background**

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 potential to capitalise on this 'space' was the inspiration behind an overhaul of the teaching and delivery of the well established Work-Based Learning modules in the BA in Education Studies at the University of Plymouth in 2007. The Education Studies degree 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.

The tutor team was keen to move away from instrumental conceptualisations of placement learning and instead to deepen connections between personal experience, employment and research. The modules were therefore redesigned to incorporate theories of learning gleaned from adult education, the study of workplace practices and cultures and autoethnographic research methods.

In this paper the tutor team will outline the changes they introduced, discuss the rationale behind the changes and reflect on data collected during the evaluation of the project. The aim of the paper will be to elicit discussion on pedagogical approaches to learning through placements and strategies to support social learning in higher education.

**Research Questions**

In 2009 the team were awarded a Teaching Fellowship by the University of Plymouth to evaluate the pedagogical innovations introduced as part of the redesign of the Work-Based Learning modules. The project aimed to ascertain the impact of the pedagogical approach in order to further enhance delivery, to disseminate good practice and to compare the approach to other models of Work-Based Learning within the institution, nationally and internationally.

The intention was to create a shift from a discourse of personal reflection to a research oriented approach. Students were encouraged to undertake a systematic ethnographic study of the working environment and its potential to support learning. Students were required to analyse their own learning within the context and to draw connections to relevant literature such as research on learning within work settings and theories of adult education.

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.

The action research project involved an evaluation of this pedagogical approach, the resources and the delivery of the modules alongside ongoing critical reflection on the practice of Work-Based Learning tutoring. Data was collected and analysed in order to evaluate the innovations implemented and to answer the following three questions:

1) Did the pedagogical approach enrich students' knowledge, creativity and practical skills beyond their enrolment on the module?

2) How did the pedagogical approach and delivery compare with the Work-Based Learning provision in other institutions nationally and internationally?

3) How did the content and structure of the modules apply to the learning practices of modern workplaces?

## Methods

The evaluation consisted of:

- Interviews with a small number of students from each of the two modules to help generate questions for a survey and contribute qualitative data on their experience of the modules;
- A web-based survey of students enrolled on the modules in 2007/08, 2008/09 to gauge the effects of the module on their understandings and practices;
- A survey of the content, pedagogies and e-learning tools (e.g. Tulip, Wetpaint, PebblePad) used in other Work-Based Learning modules at the University of Plymouth obtained through module handbooks and communication with other module leaders;
- Interviews with employers/supervisors from different work settings identified by our students as having good Work-Based Learning practices.

## Frame

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 was the intention to introduce students to the social nature of learning within organisations (e.g. Causey, Thomas and Armento, 1999; Eraut & Hirsh, 2008) and to provide them with the skills and knowledge for researching, improving and evaluating learning in the work-place (e.g. Woods & Henderson, 2002; Evans, Hodgkinson, Rainbird and Unwin, 2006).

The team approached the project (and continue to engage with it) according to action research principles (McNiff, 2002). The data collected will be analysed according to qualitative principles of inquiry (Richards, 2009) and will be used to further enhance practice.

## Research findings

This paper will present a pedagogical approach to Work Based Learning at Higher Education which encompasses: a rigorous theoretical underpinning drawn from theories of adult and social learning; support which scaffolds autonomous study and the development of research skills; and resources which encourage connections between personal experience and research. Data collected from the evaluation of a Teaching Fellowship will be used to elicit the impact of this approach on the student experience of placement learning.

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