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Everybody wins? Using the workplace as an arena for learning

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Introduction

Innovations in funding have resulted in a greater proportion of full-time students undertaking paid employment during their terms of study to fund their education (HEA 2006), a situation that is likely to increase over time. This inevitably intrudes upon time available for study, impacts both academic performance (Van Dyke et al, 2005) and retention and therefore becomes a factor in programme design, delivery and the student experience (Harvey, 2003, Callender and Wilkinson, 2003).

This paper explores the role of the workplace as an arena for learning in an academic unit for first year undergraduates at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School (MMUBS). The Work-Based Learning (WBL) unit is designed for business students who are in part time low-level jobs to fund their progress through university. It provides opportunities for students to utilise their work experience to enhance their understanding of theoretical concepts in 'real life' situations and to gain academic credit. (Johnson and Burden, 2003:39). Brennan and Little (1996) identify three strands of work-based learning: learning for work, learning at work and learning through work. This unit sits within the learning through work strand. For MMUBS this is a new model of WBL and although there is a healthy literature on related topics and the other strands of WBL, there appears to be very little on this aspect of learning practice. This paper seeks to place this approach within the wider field of WBL and to locate it within the formal/ informal learning dynamic.

As the work experience arises from employment not placement, the unit is designed to deliver potential benefits to employers but demands little. During development certain assumptions were made: firstly, that employer support for student learning would be discretionary; secondly, gaining employer support would not be a pre-requisite; and thirdly that employer benefits would be tangible and demonstrable.

The necessity of student part time jobs provides the opportunity to use employment to learn about organisations and management. The challenge was to design a unit that was flexible enough to be achievable through a variety of work patterns, including self employment and voluntary work, in organisations of any size, while still having coherence and academic substance. It was also recognised that student employment would be low level and possibly intermittent and therefore not conducive to project work. The unit design therefore focussed on generic organisational behaviour topics as stakeholders, structure, culture, communication and health and safety as well broader business issues of waste and quality.

This 20 CATS elective unit was delivered through blended learning and was run over 18 teaching weeks. There were workshops at the start and end and drop in tutorials. The rest was delivered on line through web based tutorials and email interaction between tutor and student. Engagement was encouraged through frequent short assignment tasks and tutorial questions which were returned to tutors for comment. Students were referred to company and Government websites for much of their reading material and encouraged to conduct their own on-line and primary research. The learning design was essentially one of 'mapping'. Students were introduced to business and management issues and concepts and asked to find out how these applied in the own workplace. The final assignment was a Business Improvement Report where they were required to identify an issue within their employing organisation relating to one of the topics studied that they could investigate and present as a suggestion to their manager in business report format. The process was to include both primary and secondary research. A briefing podcast made for students included a mini case study around the giving out of plastic bags in a shop. To make this an authentic task, students were asked to present their reports to their managers and include their feedback and comments.

A concern for tutors throughout the programme was the extent to which students might be disadvantaged both in terms of learning and academic attainment if they were not able to mobilise support from their employing organisation, be it their supervisors, managers or work colleagues. Another concern was how well first year students, who had not yet learned the skills and attitudes required by the level of independent learning needed in Higher Education, would engage with and succeed within a blended learning approach.

Context

There are a number of key stakeholders in this area of work based learning. Within the university environment these are the students, tutors and those managing the wider university agenda; in the workplace both employers and their line management; and finally the government and its agencies concerned with students within higher education.

Many of the agendas of the key stakeholders are inextricably bound, for example the agendas of universities are increasingly influenced and formed by the government and, via Sector Skills Councils, by employers. Government have a series of agendas which impact on students and ranging from social agendas to funding strategies and from employability to quality audit. Many of these appear to have objectives which are hard to reconcile and to compete for attention.

It may be useful initially to explore the nature of this intervention and where it fits within previous attempts to classify WBL. This is a complex and difficult area to define (Nixon et al, 2006) and one that is continually evolving in terms new forms of relationships and the language used to describe them.(Boud and Solomon, 2001) Brennan and Little (1996) identified three different strands of WBL, learning for work; learning through work and learning at work. In the 'learning for work' strand they included initiatives such as the work based elements of educational courses as the 'sandwich' and formal placement elements of degree and other courses. Learning through work included those employer training programmes that are accredited by educational institutions, whilst learning at work they describe as learning on the job which is assessed and evidenced. Though these strands of work based learning can be clearly differentiated they do have some important commonalities which differentiate them from the form of WBL discussed in this paper. These differences centre on the contractual nature of the relationships and the impact that this has for the experience and obligations of the key participants, the university, the employer and the student. In the three strands outlined by Brennan and Little (1996) and within Boud and Solomon's (2001) discussion of WBL learning forms a key part of any contract which confers on the participants both obligations to participate and often makes explicit the extent and nature of their roles and contribution. Within the form of WBL discussed in this paper the nature of 'work' is extremely flexible, it may be any form of paid employment; self employment and/or any form of paid or unpaid voluntary work. Any contract that does exist therefore is a standard employment contract or voluntary work agreement which does not cover or refer to this form of learning. This means that there is no relationship between the university and the 'employer' (this term is used in its widest sense to cover any of the forms of work outlined above) and no obligation to participate or formal role for the employer or the line manager to support or facilitate the learning of the student. In our view, therefore this form of WBL is a relatively new and uncharted strand to add to those outlined by Brennan and Little. The government identified the growth in what they identified as 'ad hoc work experience external to the programme of study' (HEFCE, 2002). Ad hoc work was defined as 'work undertaken by the student during term time, or in the short or long vacation.....paid or unpaid.....which is unplanned at the start of the studies and not organised' . Two issues were raised in connection with this form of work based learning. The first was the possible impact on academic performance and the second the possibilities it offered for recognising explicitly the learning gained. The report offered little by way of evidence in this last area but they did cite

the possibility of accreditation of volunteer work at Northumbria University. The form of WBL discussed in this paper sits within the definition of 'ad hoc' work.

The question of the impact of term time working on student academic performance has received some attention and generally, though not exclusively, been seen to have a negative impact on student performance (Barke et al, 2000; HEFCE, 2002) however, many of the government agendas, not least the funding of HE; employability(DIUS, 2008); together with the drive to widening participation (HEFCE, 2008) mean that the student with substantial work commitments will increase over time (Barke et al ,2000). Universities objectives reflect the realities of this at a number of levels. Their strategies include commitment to the widening participation agenda; maintenance of student numbers; employability and the engagement of and service to the employment community. At an operational level acknowledgement of the reality of student employment is reflected in the timetabling of lectures and tutorials to leave days clear to facilitate employment. To balance study and employment successfully makes substantial demands on students and the ability to combine both activities and gain credit for them must be an option worth exploring.

A major concern of universities undertaking work based learning is the quality and validity of the student experience, an area that is not yet fully understood from a pedagogical perspective (Nixon et al, 2006). Moreland (2005) and others suggest that for a high quality experience certain conditions need to be in place. These include all stakeholders understanding and supporting the process; induction and briefing of all stakeholders prior to the experience (Greenbank, 2002; Foster and Stephenson, 1998; Brennan & Little, 1996); accreditation available to ensure the experience is taken seriously; formative assessment is used to support the process; a portfolio is developed which includes reflection and which evidences the learning that has taken place. Greenbank (2002) also emphasises the significance of effective learning networks which include the principal actors of the student the employer and the tutor. The quality of the student experience and the effectiveness of the learning space that emerges from WBL may be significantly impacted by the level of support offered by the employer (Brennan and Little, 1996) and this was an object of real concern for this research.

The WBL initiative at MMUBS does not meet all of the conditions. Employers are only aware of the process insofar as the student chooses to inform them. This is entirely their choice and one over which the university exercises no control, other than for the purposes of this research and with the employees consent the programme leader and tutors and the university have no contact with and certainly no control or contract with the employer. There is however both formative and summative assessment and successful completion produces 20 credits. The lack of control and formalisation of the process raises key questions for the university quality monitoring process and was one of the key drivers of this research. Learning networks are facilitated by technology and the tutor but do not include the employer

and the responsibility for widening, maintaining and using these networks to include other stakeholders belong to the student rather than the tutor.

It was assumed that for the individual student the key motivation was the ability to attain accreditation without having to attend university; however their motivations proved to be much more complex than this and were in part influenced by the current economic climate and press coverage of the difficulties of new graduates in job seeking (Independent, 10.12.08). There was also an expectation that apart from the actual learning that would take place that the student would need to develop and exercise a wider and more sophisticated range of skills to complete the unit than would be necessary for a purely academic unit, that would be valued by employers and add to future employability (Yorke and Knight, 2004; Moreland, 2005; Little et al, 2006). These included a wider range of research skills together with the ability to negotiate learning space within the politics of the workplace; gain the co-operation of both their line management and possibly their colleagues; and to relate theory to practice in an applied manner which incorporated the development of additional social and cultural knowledge (Harvey and Norman, 2007; Costley, 2000).

A further area of interest for the research became the motivations of the line managers for their co-operation or otherwise and the capture of the development of these skills in terms of future employability. There is a wealth of research available on what skills and attributes employers' value in new graduates (Moreland, 2005; CBI/ Universities UK, 2009) but recent years have indicated a decline in employers willingness to participate in the development of these this has also been demonstrated in the rather weak response by employers' to the provisions of the governments response to the Leitch Report (2006) Although the unit was designed to offer employer the advantage of a work improvement report the issue of the non-cooperation of employers on the student experience and student ability to attain credible levels of academic performance was significant and one that is well documented in the literature and not without controversy (Gleeson and Keep, 2004; Thomas and Busby, 2003). This exploration of this also became a key driver in the design of the research.

If this form of WBL is to succeed it must meet the needs of all the stakeholders. It must respond to the wider government driven agendas of the university; meet the needs of academic rigour; offer employers a return for their investment of time and information and most importantly of all provide a positive student learning experience which meets their needs.

Research design

This research attempts to monitor and record the stakeholder perceptions and experiences of students mobilising and utilising employer support in the completion of their formative and summative academic work within a Work Based learning unit. MMUBS has a long history of Work-Based Learning in terms of short and long -term

placements and workplace coaching, however, this unit was a new form of learning methodology for MMUBS. As such, outcomes were monitored from the perspectives of administration; the academic staff and various key agendas of the Business School such as student satisfaction; retention and performance relative to standard units.

Students who attended an initial workshop were asked for their expectations and these were captured by tutors. At the end of the programme of study, the whole student cohort of 85 students wrote a reflective evaluation as part of their final assignment, which provided a wider insight into their experiences. The second part of this assignment was a business improvement report based on their employing organisation, for which employer feedback was a requirement to make the task authentic. The research also utilised perceptions from a self-selected sample of 14 students who completed two questionnaires and took part in interviews throughout the unit.

Four employers from different sectors were consulted during the design stage of the unit, as the main advantage of the WBL unit and the main payback for their support was seen as the Business Improvement Report. Their comments were gathered from the employer feedback incorporated into this report. A sample of employers will also be interviewed at a later stage in the research.

Tutor perceptions were captured through formal and informal interviews and moderation meetings.

Findings

This research is ongoing. However, preliminary analysis on current data shows the following themes emerging from key stakeholders.

Benefits for students

The following data arises from the student interviews.

In terms of the impact of doing this unit on workplace relationships, 43% felt that their managers took them more seriously and that they were valued more highly as employees. 35% saw that WBL had strengthened their relationship with their manager. Five students in the sample saw the possibility of long term career prospects within their employing companies. For them, WBL provided them an opportunity to become known to higher level managers, to indicate their readiness to learn and advance, to demonstrate an interest in the business and to find out more about it for future job applications. One particularly ambitious student in a national retail chain sent his business improvement report to the Chief Executive of his company and received a positive and encouraging reply.

Three students reported immediate rather than long term career benefits, notably *“WBL gave me the opportunity to go outside of the usual tasks I perform.”*

Management have also noticed significant improvements in my role as a supervisor and to reflect this I have been given a pay rise."

One student reported that he had been offered further training when it was known he was doing WBL. Another student outside the sample reported in his evaluation that showing interest in the company had led to an opportunity to take part in supervisor training.

WBL had an impact on how the sample student group thought about their work and their performance. Half of them reported that they now had a broader perspective on their organisation. A third said they were now more knowledgeable and independent in their jobs. A third reported having more job satisfaction. These themes were supported strongly in the wider evaluation data. For example,

"I enjoy work now, I see it as more than just a job."

"It's good because I like to go to work and have something to say rather than just sitting down in a corner"

"Managers take you more seriously because you show interest- you're more valued"

"If you show an interest in the company then the company will show an interest in you"

"I wasn't interested before but now I care about what happens behind the scenes"

"I realised that a school is an organisation and there is more to running it"

"..it made me think I would love to be in a managerial role, as it is very challenging.."

"Before this unit, I was never interested with my company, it was just money at the end of the day but now I enjoy going to work and learning new things about how my company works...a real eye opener"

From the wider evaluations the flexibility that the blended learning approach offered was perceived to be the prime benefit of the unit. Students who were already balancing University and work commitments appreciated having one unit out of six that did not require actual classroom attendance.

Two thirds cited 'theory into practice' as a reason for their choice. This theme came through strongly in the final evaluations. For example,

"the most valuable part was seeing first hand in the business world things we are learning about helps to consolidate the information and also encourages us to learn more"

"I learned that a manager has to keep checking everything"

“it helped me keep in touch with the real business and how the real business worked.”

“This unit has been an absolute joy to complete”

Students, who in their own definition were ‘practical learners’, liked being able to see how theory was applied in the employing organisation. Four of those interviewed stated specifically that they find sitting in classrooms difficult and that this mode of learning suited them better. For example,

“I found it often a lot easier to learn the theories by talking them through with my supervisor and applying them to the charity itself”.

“Lectures are boring.”

Another had extended her learning on the job.

“WBL gave me the opportunity to go outside of the usual tasks that I perform.”

The Business Improvement Report was a challenging task, though most recognised that it was a useful skill to learn for the future. One student wrote

“At the start when I heard this idea I was slightly hesitant towards this and felt my supervisor wouldn’t appreciate it, however I as very wrong...my supervisor was impressed”

In the evaluations, about a half of the students commented that the blended learning approach had made them become more independent, disciplined and self-sufficient learners. The learning design also encouraged them to become more proactive in their learning, researching in the workplace and on-line and asking for tutor support when they needed it. For example

“it forces you to learn off your own back which is a valuable skill when in University”.

Some students reported finding new directions for further study, the most common being sustainability and communications. For example

“it gave me more interest in ethical consumerism.”

Challenges for students

Although the student comments were overwhelmingly positive, the unit had not been without its challenges and difficulties for students. Tutors established through assessing work that those students who had involved their employers by asking questions gained better marks in assignments. In future this will be more strongly encouraged, although employer co-operation can neither be required nor guaranteed. Some students had difficulties mobilising manager support. The reasons were that managers were; too busy to pin down (especially in retail before Christmas), new or inexperienced in company, unwilling to take on extra work to

things find out, non-synchronised shift patterns, lack of knowledge, lack of interest, not wanting to lose face by confessing ignorance, not known personally by the student or not able access to intranet.

Mobilising managerial or colleague support required sensitivity on the part of many students to timing, size of request and awareness of a trading of favours. This process in itself was a learning experience.

There was a wide variation in size and sophistication of employing organisations which included branches of national retail chains, a family restaurant and one student who was self- employed working as a mobile hairdresser. This inevitably meant that some students found certain topics far easier to research and apply than others. The range of resources available to a student working in a national chain with access to intranet resources was very different to those working for SMEs. Also the emphasis on certain issues varied. For example, while students in Tesco found it easy to find out about waste policies, a student in Asda found it very difficult. A student in M & S found researching sustainability policies easy and fascinating while a student in a nursery found it very difficult.

Work patterns could also sometimes present difficulties. If students worked in vacations only, then term time access to formal or informal employer support was limited. For example, a student working in the leisure industry completed their 100 hours work requirement during the Easter vacation and had to base their assignments on the previous summer's experience. The business closed during the winter which was the period of study.

Students found themselves on their own with this unit and some felt they would have liked others to talk to about their assignments. Some students on the same degree programme formed their own informal study groups, sharing their experiences, ideas and resolving difficulties. While the majority of students completed the assignment requirements, the blended learning approach may have been too challenging for three students who failed to submit anything. Without regular classes and tutors to chase them they let every deadline go, ignored tutor emails and did not ask for help.

Finally, the on-line approach requires a degree of computer literacy. This cannot be taken for granted for overseas students. A student from India said he had very little experience in school in his country of computers and the internet. In addition he wrote,

"The challenge for me in this blended learning approach was to take time out from daily routine of my busy life to read online material because I am living with my uncle here and he has four small children...."

Benefits for employers

The Business Improvement Reports written by students were very varied in quality. Some had not included the required employer feedback. There may be several

reasons for this; lack of availability, unwillingness on the part of the student, lack of employer co-operation. Anecdotal evidence from tutors suggests the first was an issue for about 15%.

Employer comments ranged from the bland and non committal (and possibly written by the student him/herself) to the thoughtful, appreciative and well considered. How useful the students' research data and suggested improvements would be to the employers is difficult to ascertain. However, those students who attended the final workshops all reported that their managers had been interested and some had passed their reports higher up the chain.

The research also revealed unanticipated benefits for employers that were in addition to the expected benefit from the Business Improvement Report. In the main, these were associated with employer learning, organisational learning and enhanced employee commitment and motivation and future recruitment.

Informal employer learning happened when students asked questions to which the manager did not know the answer but went to find out. This happened particularly on the assignment relating to values, mission statements and organisational structure. Two students reported that their supervisors regularly asked about her work on WBL and were keen to learn themselves.

Organisational learning may have resulted from the students asking questions. For example, the small hotel that did not have a mission statement began to wonder whether to create one. Those businesses which were not tackling waste reduction may have had their awareness heightened.

Increased employee commitment and more positive attitude to work emerged strongly from student evaluations and will be a visible benefit for employers. This was expressed in a number of ways but most eloquently by this student who works in a call centre

"This unit has helped me gain a better perspective of what it is like to be a successful manager or supervisor in a large organisation. People moan at every opportunity when working under somebody else, but I now know that it is much harder to effectively run a team, meeting goals along the way, than many people think, or know.. I take away. .. more respect for these people."

There is evidence that some employees have identified certain student employees for training investment and promotion. This was linked to the WBL process in the minds of the students. In terms of longer term recruitment of future managers this seems a likely employer benefit though this cannot yet be supported by actual research evidence.

Challenges for employers

However, raising levels of student knowledge and awareness of workplace issues may also lead to challenge to the employer and an insight into shortcomings as well as good practice

“I didn’t realise how badly run my company was and am really looking forward to writing my BIR”

“ My manager and I had a rant about the stress levels in the job”

“..when it came to (researching) waste....I was so stressed...I thought what kind of company is this? They’ve got no records on waste or anything...”

“After we did health and safety I told my supervisor I’d been there three months and still had no idea what the fire evacuation procedures were. We had a fire practice a week later and it was really difficult to get the customers out of the store.”

In addition, Business Improvement Reports may be seen by some employers as challenging to their competence and this might account for some students’ reluctance to present them.

Benefits for customers

Although this aspect was not included in the research specifically some students did feel their interactions with customers had improved. For example, one student was able to explain to customers the sustainability and policy issues behind the introduction of a 1p charge for plastic bags. Many Business Improvement Reports suggested ways of improving service to customers as well as contributing to profitability. On a more general level, it may be assumed that more motivated and committed employees would provide a better quality of customer service.

Benefits for the Business School

From the perspective of the academics, early performance indicators demonstrate that the quality of student learning is enhanced both at the conceptual level and in terms of the efficacy of the process, leveraging standard blended learning into the action research arena. The outcomes of assessed work indicate a higher and more mature level of thinking than might have been expected from first year undergraduates. In addition, the endorsement by their manager of the espoused theory appears to add greater meaning to the learning for the students.

WBL assignments foster originality of work as they are based on the student’s own workplace. There is more evidence of real learning than in more traditional assignments which at worst, lend themselves to ‘cut and paste’ and a re-working of lecture/tutorial material. Marking the WBL assignments provides learning for the tutors who gain insight into current work practices of small companies to national

chains. Also WBL student work is more rewarding and enjoyable to mark than more traditional submissions.

It may be within the context of widening participation that WBL offers a more practical, 'hands on' approach to academic study which may favour students who are less traditionally academic.

The flexibility of the unit delivery meant that students who were dissatisfied by their chosen elective were able to transfer late on the WBL programme and still gain the credit they needed to pass the first year. Hence, the cohort was larger at the end than the beginning by thirteen students, despite three having left the University.

For the Business School, this form of learning has positive resource implications in terms of the use of physical space and staff flexibility; however, the more significant implications are for the enhancement of the student experience and the perception that the University is responding to their needs.

Benefits for Government

There is clear evidence that the WBL process helps to foster 'work ready graduates' and serves the Government's employability and widening participation agendas (Leitch, 2006).

Discussion

Although at an early stage, there are clear areas of debate and discussion emerging. In mobilising the support of their employer, students play a key role as a broker in the development of a mutual learning relationship between the university and the business community that it serves. It would appear to offer additional benefits in terms of the development of interpersonal skills; political and business awareness; and research skills, which are required to meet the demands of the unit but would not necessarily be addressed within a normal lecture/tutorial situation. There are also benefits in terms of learning styles and possible impact on future employment opportunities. There appear to be additional benefits to the employer in terms of manager learning and organisational learning, whilst for the university it offers a resource effective means of embedding relevance and flexibility into the student learning experience of the student whilst developing independent learners.

Finally, it demonstrates a positive response to the economic realities of current and future students by accrediting and adapting a challenging, potentially negative situation into a practical learning experience that utilises the whole environment and not just the formal curriculum for learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1997). A case of everybody wins?

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