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An investigation into blogging as an opportunity for work-integrated learning

Ruth Stoker
University of Huddersfield

Abstract
Work-integrated learning develops in graduates a set of transferable skills. Traditionally these are gained through work placement activity where students are embedded with an employer for a set period of time. Billett (2011a) states it is necessary to widen our definition of opportunities for work based learning and discuss it in terms of experiential learning to include observation of practice and simulated experience. This paper extends his argument to explore the opportunities offered by the online environment, and suggests that blogging facilitates the development of transferable skills and attributes in undergraduates including creativity, sophisticated communication, initiative and problem solving. It suggests that blogging adds another dimension to work experience, and should be considered within a curriculum for experiential learning. This paper also explores the use of blogging as an additional tool in the teaching of work-integrated learning.

Introduction
The development of generic, transferable skills through work integrated learning in higher education settings has been well documented, and studies have demonstrated their value to graduates and employers. (Smith and Wilson, 1992; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini 2004; Wilton, 2012)

In addition, opportunities for work-integrated learning have been well described and understood, with students usually encouraged to undertake some form of supervised placement where they are embedded with an established employer for a set period of time. This could be through a day release programme, a sandwich year or a short-term block placement for example. However, a recent large scale study by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council which looked at integrating practice-based experiences into teaching and learning, acknowledged that while supervised placements are the norm, it was also necessary to look beyond these to include other modes of experiential learning which could be equally as valid in undergraduate programmes. (Billett 2011a)

Billett frames the opportunities for work-integrated learning to embrace wider forms of experiential learning including observation of practice, simulated activity, and prior employment. He argues that the teaching of work-integrated learning needs to factor in these wider practice-based experiences. (2011a)

This paper suggests that Billett’s “opportunities” for practice-based experiences could be extended, and explores the possibility of using the online environment for work-integrated learning through
something as simple as blogging. It also discusses the associated curriculum considerations and suggests some of the learning outcomes offered through work-integrated learning could be achieved in an online environment.

**Context**

Blogging is a contested concept, under constant revision as new online platforms emerge. For the purpose of this study we are talking about blogging in terms of creating a personal website or webpage where an individual records opinion and deposits news stories and links to other sites on a regular basis.

The context of the study is media and journalism where students are actively encouraged to write and deposit blogs.

One of the challenges facing journalism students is demonstrating to prospective employers their ability to research and write viable stories. Historically, journalism students have sent work in to newspapers and magazines in the hope that their stories will be used in printed format, helping the student build a "cuttings file" of published work. Their publication track record is often requested at job interviews, and a good cuttings file can make the difference between being offered a post and being rejected. However, getting work published as a student is difficult. Unsolicited submissions are selected at the vagaries of the news editor who has to balance that day's news agenda with available space, often finding that there is no room for copy from unknown and unproven writers.

The arrival of the online platforms such as wordpress.com and blogger.com offered opportunities for students to showcase their work to an international audience - providing them with an unlimited cuttings file for perusal by potential employers along with valuable meta data such as the number of people who have read any particular blog, and comments the stories may have attracted from readers.

Jones and Salter (2012) studied the development of online environments and the emergence of digital journalism. They observed that the proliferation of news blogging has marked a significant change in journalism practice. "The divide between amateur and professional journalist was placed in sharp relief as technology lowered the barriers to entry for publication and opened up multiple portals for the 'non-professional' to practice."

According to Jones and Salter (ibid) blogging now has a well-established place in media industries, with many writers making a career in this field. The ease of creating blogs through sites such as wordpress.com, blogger.com and blogspot.com now means that anyone can write and deposit a blog, including journalism students, and many journalism programmes across the UK higher education sector encourage student blogging to the extent that lecturers host exemplar blogs which are used in their teaching of journalism skills. (Linford 2013)
However, blogging is in essence self-directed work and while it is encouraged in the development of journalism writing skills, it is not usually framed as valid experiential learning in work-integrated learning programmes. Indeed, some studies argue that key learning gained in traditional placements included being able to adjust to working in a team and "fitting in" (Bennett, Dunne & Carre 2000) are aspects of work which are difficult to access when working as a lone blogger.

Billett (2011a) makes the point that the environment in which students engage and experience can shape their learning, and that academic and practice based settings offer different kinds of learning. He discusses these settings in terms of physical and social environments in an attempt to embrace wider definitions of experiential learning, and adds: "elements of all three forms of the knowledge required for work performance: conceptual, procedural and dispositional, will develop from experiences in each setting."

Donath and Boyd (2004) acknowledge that people now view the online world as a rich social environment which offers a distinctive set of experiences. Therefore, the online environment could offer an additional setting where work-integrated learning can take place.

This study considers whether it is time to widen our thinking of work-integrated learning settings and make room for the experiences of online activity such as blogging in our discussions. We need to ask whether there are transferable skills inherent in practice in an online setting which would benefit from wider dissemination, and puts the question, should we extend our pedagogy and curriculum considerations to take into account how students engage with and experience work in online environments?

**Methodology**

This is a pilot study to assess the scope of further investigation into this area. The basis of the research was a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with three established bloggers and three media employers. The aim of the interviews was firstly to ascertain whether learning took place through the practice of blogging, and if so, what had been learned; and secondly, to assess the impact of blogging, that is whether media employers believed blogging conferred an advantage on potential job applicants.

The bloggers were selected using the following criteria:

- they had to have been writing a blog for more than 12 months
- they were journalism students in the second or final year of a BA journalism programme
- they had an established blog following
- they each wrote for a different audience - fashion, gaming and sport
They were interviewed individually between April and June 2013, and open unstructured questions were used to allow them to describe their online activity. In addition they were each asked the following questions:

- why did you start to write a blog?
- how do you manage your blogging activity?
- what have you learned through blogging?
- do you feel your blog conferred any advantage on you in terms of employability, and if so, how has this manifest itself?
- how is your journalistic output evaluated

The media employers were interviewed between April and June 2013 and were drawn from three different sectors. They were:

- a training manager for a large regional newspaper group, responsible for training journalists in all aspects of news and features production, for both print and online publication, and also with responsibility for recruiting trainee journalists
- the deputy editor of a large weekly newspaper with responsibility for recruiting and training journalists
- an operations manager for a large sports management company with responsibility for recruiting and managing online sports writers and journalists

They were asked open questions to encourage a discussion of their interaction with bloggers and job applicants, and in addition each was asked the following:

- do you recruit journalists who blog?
- does their blogging experience confer an advantage on them when being considered for a post in your organisation?
- what transferable skills does blogging allow job applicants to demonstrate?

To evaluate learning through blogging it was necessary to consider what transferable attributes were gained through the process against a widely accepted matrix. For this purpose Prospects guidance for graduates was used. Prospects is the UK government graduate careers service which lists skills, abilities and work behaviours that employers seek in undergraduates. (Prospects.ac.uk, accessed 4.7.13) See table 1.
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<th>Behaviours</th>
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<td>Customer awareness</td>
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Table 1: What employers look for in graduates. (Source: Prospects.ac.uk accessed 4.7.13)

While some attributes are inherent in blogging (communication and IT skills, taking responsibility for your own ideas) this study seeks to understand whether blogging develops other attributes.

There are a number of limitations inherent in a study of this nature. The small sample size taken may not accurately and completely reflect the role of blogging in work integrated learning, and this needs to be taken into consideration. Each of the bloggers selected are successful in terms of the size of their following, and those bloggers who have not established a regular readership and who don’t elicit peer review of posts may well have a different learning experience. However, the responses elicited have helped identify areas which would benefit from further, more detailed research, and this study should be viewed as preliminary work which explores the scope for future investigation.

**Key findings**

This pilot study demonstrates that there are transferable skills, abilities and behaviours gained through the practice of blogging. Looking at the Prospects list, it is possible to map this across to the experiences as described by the students and employers in this study.

**Initiative and Enterprise**

Two of the three bloggers were encouraged to write blogs by tutors, Dearnley (face-to-face interview, 2013) while at further education college, Murphy (telephone interview, 2013) on starting
a university journalism programme. Both were told that blogging was useful in demonstrating their capacity as writers, and something which should enhance their employment prospects.

Dearnley added that at 16 in further education, few students saw the value of blogging, but she was encouraged to continue after reading a magazine industry article advertising an internship.

"There is a Glamour magazine internship and this article said having a blog is handy as it gives you more experience. I went to a Glamour event in Manchester and spoke to the editor Jo Elvin who said one of the things they looked for when recruiting was a blog, as it shows personality and commitment in regularly putting posts out and in researching trends."

(interview, 2013, Dearnley)

Lloyd (face-to-face interview, 2013) began writing while working as an administration clerk on leaving school. She said she had missed the creativity of writing, and began her own gaming blog which helped her develop a portfolio of writing which in turn aided her acceptance onto a university journalism programme.

Murphy was encouraged to develop a sports blog during his first week on a university sports journalism programme. His lecturer told him that it was a good way of getting his work noticed. Since then he has managed his own blog space, depositing stories several times a week and developing a speciality in darts news. The success of his venture is such that on graduating he was offered a post with Modus Sports Management to develop an online presence for their clients - major international darts players.

All three bloggers saw the potential of online media for showcasing their work and expanding their network of industry and genre specific contacts. All three have run blogs for more than two years, and have substantial traffic with thousands of unique views per month. In each case, they saw blogging as a means to enhance employment opportunities by enabling them to demonstrate a key skill set specific to media industries.

Arguably, setting up and maintaining long running blogs demonstrate all three Prospects abilities - creativity, enterprise and initiative, but also behaviours such as thriving on challenge, initiating change, and taking responsibility for your own ideas.

In the case of Dearnley and Murphy, they were encouraged to blog as part of a larger student cohort, but only a handful of students followed through on this opportunity, an estimate of less than
10% of the cohort. This raises the question of whether the teaching of work-integrated learning should more actively incentivise blogging so that more students embrace the challenge.

Communications and IT skills

Both bloggers and employers demonstrated an awareness of the importance of literacy in blogs. Dearnley said she was aware initially that her writing contained errors, and quickly learned the need to improve her self-editing skills following negative comments from readers. "I do make mistakes, so now if I am unsure about my writing, I get someone to check it for me. My self-editing of copy has improved a lot."

Lloyd agreed that blog feedback from readers emphasised the need to check and edit copy to ensure it is grammatically correct and error free. "I have a massive portfolio of work and can see how I have improved over time. There is a better flow in my writing now and I am learning how to correct my own mistakes to make sure the work sounds right. I am better at writing to length now too, as if there is too much, people won't read it."

All three bloggers expressed irritation at badly written blogs and demonstrated a developing awareness of the need for their writing to appear professional. Interestingly, while blogging is self-directed work, the online community acts in a supervisory capacity, hereby commenting on poorly written blog posts. It is evident that a new relationship between the lone writer and the audience is emerging facilitated by the online environment, which in a work-integrated learning framework could be viewed as a substitute for the relationship between the student and the placement supervisor at some level.

A good standard of writing is seen as being very important to media employers, and Wilson (face-to-face interview, 2013) felt that one of the weaknesses of blogging was that it exposed poor writers where they had not properly evaluated reader feedback and were not improving the standard of their copy. Conversely, the high standard of literacy in articles posted by Murphy (www.chrismurphy180.weebly.com) caught the attention of Lewis Jones, operations director of Modus Sports Management. Murphy had requested an interview with one of Jones' clients, and had directed Jones to his blog for examples of work he had already done. Jones was impressed. "I said this guy is very good at writing, shall we ask him to do match reports for us?" (telephone interview, Jones 2013) Jones has since gone on to employ Murphy to develop the company's online activity.
Creativity and thinking creatively about problems

Bloggers have to have something to write about which is engaging and interesting as without this they are unlikely to attract and keep readers. According to Buss (2006) "...compelling content is the most important requisite of an interesting blog" in attracting and maintaining readers. Creativity is certainly valued as a transferable skill in media industries (Wallis cited in Radford 2010)

Murphy said one of the challenges was finding something interesting to write about every week. He advocated avoiding personal self-reflective writing as this was often boring to the reader. He focussed on finding news stories he could follow up, and developed niche writing about darts. "You have to keep getting content out there even when there is not much going on, and you have to be creative to do that, to make news."

Lloyd agreed that developing story ideas was an important skill which had been drawn out through blogging. Dearnley, Lloyd and Murphy evaluated the success of a particular blog post using data such as the number of hits it had received, whether it had been "tweeted" - mentioned in a third party micro blog via the Twitter platform - and "retweeted" - forwarded on through a chain of interested readers on Twitter. "I can tell what subjects engage audiences from the comments I get, and can work out what has gone well and what hasn't, particularly if there are no hits." (interview, 2013, Dearnley)

The drive for creative content led each blogger to a more thoroughly developed understanding of their subject area, a greater awareness of news and current story trends upon which to build their own writing. Again, feedback from readers, and in particular through the use of validation tools such as the "like" button, arguably acts as "placement supervisor" by determining the direction that creative work should take. If the peer group "like" a particular piece it suggests that this is the sub-genre they are interested in reading more about.

Arguably, through the monitoring of interest, students demonstrated both customer awareness and application of numeracy.

Time management

"If you blog every week, on a particular day each week, then you develop an expectation in the reader. If you promise a particular frequency of publication, then you have to meet that expectation or you will lose a lot of readers." (interview, 2013, Murphy)
Murphy's point is that to gain success as a blogger, you have to have the self-discipline to meet self-directed deadlines or risk losing your audience.

Both Dearnley and Lloyd concur. Dearnley said she posts at least three articles each week. "I spend two hours each week blogging. I find ideas from what comes to mind, life, looking to see what's on in the fashion world."

Regularity of posts and retaining a good following - she had 98,000 unique views last year - are important to Dearnley as she is now recognised as the voice of young people in the fashion world and is being quoted in established fashion magazines.

Lloyd blogs every week, sometimes more frequently and has attracted around 1000 unique views each month. "Time management is important, you have to find time on a regular basis to write your blog."

Jones at Modus Sports Management said that regular blog posts were important in a professional context. When running a media and promotions agency, it is important that prospective employees can demonstrate that they can keep a thread of blogs running to gather and maintain a reader base. "It's no good having a blog then not doing anything with it for a while." (interview, 2013, Jones)

Time management skills then are driven by the imperative to attract, engage and maintain readers through regular and predictable posts - another reader interaction which suggests an element of peer supervision.

Customer awareness and problem solving
In interview, none of the bloggers volunteered an awareness of the development of enterprise through their ventures. However, they were each using sophisticated online methodologies to promote their work and gain a blog "following". Each used social networks Facebook and Twitter to drive traffic towards their blogs, and conversely used their blogs to drive traffic towards social networks, techniques which are commonly used to generate interest in online content. (Jordan, 2008)

For example, Murphy discussed his blog in terms of identifying the posts which attracted the most hits and developing work in that niche, in his case coverage of darts players and events.
"I followed reader trends. In the beginning I had to beg retweets, I put my email address on my blog and linked the blog into my email signature, then started to pick up on which blogs had most hits and feedback. In the beginning you do a lot of work to promote your blog, hopelessly tweeting hundreds of people in the hope that some retweet you. All I do now is send a tweet saying the blog is up and people now follow me and go straight to the blog." (interview, 2013, Murphy)

One area which none of the bloggers has developed is a mechanism for making money through their personal blog spaces. All three attract significant volume of traffic and they could sell advertising space around their blogs, but perhaps because of a lack of direct supervision they have not yet exploited this potential. If we accept that blogging could be considered in a work-integrated learning framework, then the monetisation of blogs needs to be covered in any associated curriculum.

In each case management of the blog space demonstrates an awareness of the customer as being essential to the success of their enterprise, and their conscious development of a reader base using meta data demonstrates numeracy and sophisticated levels of IT skills.

Additional skills
There are some transferable skills not covered in the Prospects list which were raised in interview by Dearnley, Lloyd and Murphy (2013) and are worthy of some consideration:

- **Networking**
  Each felt they had tapped into a professional network through their work online and each cited this as a transferable skill which they felt they had developed. Murphy has contacts with most of the major darts players in the UK and the media organisations interested in following darts. Dearnley was invited to cover London Fashion Week through her fashion industry network and Lloyd has been asked to cover major international computer gaming events through contacts made via her blogs.

- **Self-confidence**
  Each blogger independently said that their self-confidence had improved through their writing and the positive feedback from readers. It could be argued that self-confidence enables them to demonstrate some of the behaviours expected of graduates. They each discussed their ventures in terms of changing and adapting them to meet reader expectation (initiating change) and also in having the confidence to explore new ideas (coping with uncertainty).
Employer considerations

While each of the employers recognised blogging demonstrated transferable skills, there was a markedly mixed response as to whether it conferred an advantage in terms of employability.

Jones manages all online activity for a major sports management company, Modus (http://modusdarts.tv/). He said the transferable skills offered through the medium of the online environment were valuable to him as an employer, and said that his company employed Murphy on the strength of his online activity. Blogging had conferred an advantage on Murphy. "If we had five people send in a request for work, we would look at someone with a blog, but it would have to be good. We don't have time to look at a lot of people at interview. Blogs tell us immediately what they are like, it shows they are keen." (interview 2013, Jones)

He added that it also demonstrated technical competence with social media. As his company is rooted in online public relations it is no surprise that having a demonstrable ability to blog is advantageous to job applicants.

However, both newspaper employers did not feel that blogging in particular enhanced employability. Stephanie Daley is the deputy editor of a weekly newspaper which thrives on its direct relationship with its readers, and she was concerned that the ability to communicate through online environments was at the detriment to interpersonal communication skills. Job applicants who have approached her have in the past created personal diary style blogs which have not showcased their journalistic abilities.

Daley said the content of the blog was critical when using it to judge job applicants, as the imperative is to recruit journalists who can write well rather than present "a stream of consciousness" which readers found "off-putting". She described much online writing as irrelevant as bloggers don't often consider who might be reading their work. "I don't think they even think about the concept that someone else might see it other than their mates."

This is underpinned by Ellis and Richards (writing in Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Their chapter in this work considers work related blogs, where they found a number of bloggers who had their employment in areas such as health-care and social work terminated after their employers had read injudicious blog posts. In these cases, the bloggers had not considered the wider audience fully.
Daley also made the point that blogging failed to demonstrate teamwork as it is a solitary activity for the most part, and often did not give any indication as to how writers interacted with people. "Blogging doesn't necessarily help in developing skills for getting good interviews, as it detaches you from people."

When recruiting new journalists Daley said she would not take a blog into consideration but would instead call the applicants in to undertake a more traditional form of work placement so that they could be assessed on their attitude and personal skills alongside their ability to write.

John Wilson is the training manager of a large regional newspaper group and recruits and trains journalists. He had similar experiences to Daley, and said:

"Blogs show an aptitude to write and a bit of discipline, but a lot of them are one dimensional and there are other qualities that we are looking for. We would rather get applicants into the office to see what they can do in a proper work environment. I think cyberspace has given people the chance to have a say but it has also given voice to a lot of people who have nothing to say at all. I would rather have bright people who are curious and who can undertake a difficult interview, someone who can go and known on someone's door to talk to them. My experience of some bloggers is that they can't talk to people."
(interview, 2013, Wilson)

Daley added that her experience of young journalists was that they had grown up with online environments to the extent that they were most comfortable with electronic communication methodologies, and that direct interpersonal communication skills had suffered as a result.

Interestingly, one negative aspect raised by Daley was some bloggers' attitudes to other team members. "One problem is that we have had some job applicants come to us with a sense of overconfidence in their ability as they have an established online following and that doesn't help in the workplace."

Early research into personality predictors of blogging in the United States of America suggested that early adopters of blogging tended towards being neurotic or extravert (Guadagno R E, Okdie B M, & Eno C A, 2008), perhaps explaining Daley's perception. However, blogging has moved on and is increasingly being used as a media industry tool by a much wider subset of personalities, and indeed the use of social media is increasingly being encouraged which strongly dilutes the visibility of the
overconfident. (McMahon & Carlyle, 2012) Indeed, each of the bloggers interviewed stressed that their posts were news based rather than being rooted in the promotion of personal diary opinions.

It is evident that the early opinion-led blogs have tainted the perception of some traditional newspaper employers who acknowledged that while blogs did demonstrate a large number of transferable skills, also felt they exposed weaknesses. Conversely, employers whose business is online have a greater appreciation of the skill set offered by bloggers. It would appear that blog content is critical when considering whether it should be used to enhance employment opportunities and the teaching of blogging within a work-integrated learning framework needs take this into account.

**Summary**

Are there transferable skills to be learned through blogging? The answer has to be yes. Table 2 attempts to identify where those bloggers who took part in this study have demonstrated the graduate employability attributes as defined by Prospects.

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<th>Met</th>
<th>Abilities</th>
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**Table 2: Where bloggers meet graduate attributes as defined by Prospects**

On this basis, can blogging be considered in a framework of work-integrated learning? Billett (2011b) has constructed a framework of good practice for the management of work integrated learning. He
encourages a three staged pedagogical approach, preparation for experiential learning, monitoring and guidance during practice-based experience, and reflection on what has been learned.

Billett (2011b) also sets out a number of curriculum considerations for organising and enacting practice-based experience, including

- being clear about what is to be learnt for identifying what experiences are likely to secure that learning
- acknowledging practice settings as providing important and worthwhile educational experiences as plan accordingly
- considering options other than supervised placements to secure learning experiences
- students’ interest and engagement are salient for enacting and realising effective learning outcomes in practice settings

(Billett 2011b)

Certainly blogging seems to offer an option for experiential learning where students are interested and engaged. The students who participated in this pilot study were not formally subjected to the curriculum considerations associated with work-integrated learning and their learning was both informal and incidental as defined by Watkins and Marsick's work on learning modes (1992). Introducing formal structures to underpin blogging as experiential learning tool can only enhance the opportunity blogging offers. In the context of media industries, it would appear that teaching enterprise through blogging should form part of the enacted curriculum.

While those students who took part in this study were encouraged to blog by lecturers, this was purely as a means of showcasing their work to gain wider notice by media industries, not as a substitute for work-integrated learning. Therefore, they were not subjected to the three staged pedagogical approach to experiential learning as suggested by Billett. Preparation for blogging did not extend beyond functional considerations and therefore students were not necessarily framing their writing in such a way as to satisfy all industry-based imperatives. While those in this study did demonstrate a capacity to interview, not all bloggers do, and this is one of the key vocational skills which perhaps should be encouraged through the preparatory stage of work-integrated learning management, to ameliorate the concerns raised by Daley and Wilson. This would then satisfy Billett’s intended curriculum consideration of “aligning the kinds of experiences provided for students with the intended learning outcomes”.

Billett (2011b) suggests there should be direct guidance by more experienced practitioners during practice-based experience. It could be argued that one of the advantages conferred by blogging is
the direct feedback offered by the online community. Each of the students who took part in this study recognised the signalling from their readers, such as no responses meaning the story didn’t engage people, criticism about the standard of writing meant improvements in literacy was required, etc. However, direct guidance by lecturers would enable student bloggers to reach a deeper understanding of their craft, and perhaps allow for learning in those areas which are not immediately obvious, such as enterprise.

Finally, Billett (2011b) raises the importance of after-practice reflection, including making "links to and reconciliations between what is taught (learnt) in the academy and what is experienced in practice settings". In interview, each of the students admitted they had not reflected on their learning journeys through their work as bloggers, and that through taking part in the study they had recognised what had been learnt through their experiences and how it linked to the aspects of the curriculum. This underpins the need to bring blogging into the work-integrated learning curriculum to enhance reflection on practice.

While this study has focussed on blogging within the context of journalism and media industries, it could be argued that if the pedagogic practices propounded by Billett are taken into consideration, the value of teaching blogging as an opportunity for experiential learning could be extended into other disciplines, particularly where appropriate learning outcomes can be aligned to context.

When considering the curriculum, teachers in other disciplines would need to ensure that blogging as a tool is appropriately adapted for their students. For example, some disciplines do not naturally lend themselves to developing creativity or sophisticated communication skills, and blogging could be brought into the work-integrated learning curriculum as a tool to develop these attributes.

Engineering students could be encouraged to blog about industrial and scientific developments, or host photography led blogs which discuss civil engineering structures and architecture, and business and management students could blog company reports, innovation projects, or a detailed analysis of a Government budget. Students seeking entry to the hospitality industry could develop travel blogs. In each case, blogging as a work-integrated learning tool offers the opportunity for experiential development of creativity, communication, marketing skills, research capacities, sophisticated use of technology, and an awareness of audience, attributes which can be difficult to demonstrate through traditional work-integrated learning methodologies yet which are aligned to the Prospects ideal.
Blogging doesn’t facilitate teamwork, which is clearly set out as a skill under the Prospects list. Blogging is a solitary occupation, and higher education institutions need to consider the importance of teamwork as a learning outcome relevant to their discipline. It may be necessary to frame blogging as an ancillary opportunity, which adds another dimension to work-integrated learning rather than considering it as an alternative to traditional placement experience. It should sit alongside and enhance more traditional opportunities to ensure that students are facilitated in aspects of learning that are difficult to access through an online only environment. It should be recognised that blogging does offer opportunities to develop transferable skills which are not always easy to draw out through traditional placements, and therefore the teaching of blogging in a work-integrated learning curriculum has a value.

In conclusion, there are transferable skills learned through the practice of blogging, sufficient to consider blogging as an opportunity for experiential learning. However, for students to fully exploit this opportunity, it needs to sit within a formalised pedagogical framework where it is mapped to curriculum considerations, and good practice is observed in the preparation, supervision and evaluation of the experience. Blogging offers employers an alternative way to assess job applicants, but whether this is advantageous to the student depends on the employment context.

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Learning within the Social Context of the Workplace

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Key words
Cooperative education, learning, social context, sport, work-integrated learning

Abstract
Cooperative education aims to provide students with work-integrated learning experiences through which they can develop skills and knowledge for use in future career contexts. During their placements students are encouraged to develop professional relationships with workplace-based colleagues and supervisors, take on professional responsibilities and work as members of teams. There is a pervasive view associated with workplace-based learning that students simply learn through experiencing everyday activities in the workplace. A socio-cultural view of learning that underpins cooperative education positions learning as a social process wherein students learn not only through participation in workplace-based activities but also through social interaction with work colleagues. A socio-cultural view also recognises that workplace knowledge is distributed throughout an organisation (some explicit some tacit) and accessed by participants in different ways. To date, little discussion has taken place about the learning opportunities that open up when students develop good professional relationships wherein they are able to access important tacit knowledge about the workplace and how to successfully navigate its culture and practice. This, of course, needs to be critically engaged so that potentially divisive workplace cultures are not unwittingly reproduced. Drawing on a case study of a cooperative education programme within an undergraduate sport degree, this paper highlights the importance of ‘the social’ as a key influence of student learning.

Introduction
The provision of work integrated learning opportunities is increasingly being seen as an important dimension of a comprehensive undergraduate university education. Underpinning this is widespread sectorial recognition of the important role that universities play in preparing young people for active and sustained participation in the labour market. Whereas historically a university education might have been understood to be more ‘liberal’ in its orientation, increasing levels of accountability to
governmental agendas has amplified the vocational dimension of a university education. Through the inclusion of work integrated learning models such as ‘Cooperative Education’ university graduates are considered better positioned to move into labour market.

Cooperative education is a work integrated learning model that involves students’ learning being enhanced through authentic experiences undertaken within a workplace setting. While it shares similar attributes to other approaches to ‘workplace learning’ (Eames & Coll, 2010), it has its own unique characteristics that differentiate it as a model. Fundamental to cooperative education is a philosophical commitment to learning through the experience of work, rather than simply learning about work. To this end, cooperative education programmes integrate classroom studies with time spent in the workplace. It is the integration of the learning environments of both the university and the workplace that provides the distinctions between cooperative education and other models or frameworks of workplace based learning. Cooperative education programmes are currently offered in a diverse range of disciplines ranging from its original base in engineering to fields such as business, arts, hospitality, tourism, information technology and science (Groenewald, Drysdale, Chiupka, & Johnston, 2011). The context of this paper is an undergraduate sport and recreation program wherein students undertake a work placement, generally two days per week, during the final year of their degree.

While there is a clear vision of integrated learning within cooperative education, our previous work reveals the key stakeholders within the model (namely, students, industry and academics) often interpret aspects of its implementation differently (Fleming & Hickey, 2013). Indeed, it has been acknowledged that student learning in the cooperative education context is under researched and under theorised (Bartkus & Higgs, 2011; Eames & Bell, 2005). Recently there has been a call for researchers to contribute to advancing the understanding of student learning, across a range of discipline specific contexts (Coll & Zegwaard, 2011; Eames & Cates, 2011). Inherent in this call is an increasing need to recognise the social and cultural dimensions of the learning that occurs in the workplace (Eames & Bell, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991). To this end, the focus of this paper is on the socio-cultural perspective of student learning experiences in a sport cooperative education programme.

Learning in the Workplace
A range of theories have been proposed to explain learning in the workplace and more specifically through cooperative education (Eames & Cates, 2011). The theoretical underpinnings of cooperative education can be traced back to John Dewey’s work and his views on the significance of experience
in the learning process. His philosophy of ‘pragmatism’, asserts that individuals need to see the point of their education in order to learn effectively. Within this framework knowledge is valued for what individuals can do with it, and not just as an end in itself. Dewey (1916, 1938) argued that education must engage with and enhance experience and suggested that learning occurs as a result of problem solving in rich environments, wherein education is the changing of behaviours through experience. Leveraging Deweyan theory workplace-based learning models, such as cooperative education, look to enhance student learning through the provision of meaningful/authentic learning experiences. To this end, the cooperative education model seeks to nurture student learning through the provision of sustained periods of work-based placement wherein theory can be integrated with practice. Of course not all experiences lead to desirable learning. Rather, it is one’s ability to (critically) reflect on their experience that is needed to facilitate meaningful learning.

Theories of experiential learning have been recruited to account for the integrated nature of learning that takes place in cooperative education (Cates & Jones, 1999). Discussions in the literature (Eames & Cates, 2011) draw attention to Kolb’s learning model (1984) wherein knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Kolb characterises an effective learning experience as comprising four stages, namely, (i) concrete experience, (ii) reflective observation, (iii) abstract conceptualisation and (iv) active experimentation. These stages connect well with the phases of learning espoused in the cooperative education model, where learners engage in an experience, reflect on that experience from different perspectives, develop a personal theory of (effective) action and develop a plan for future action. The implication here is that for the cooperative education model to be fully operational students should move through the full learning cycle.

The frameworks of Dewey and Kolb connect well with the integrated learning aspirations of the cooperative education model (Eames & Cates, 2011). Both of these frameworks recognise, albeit differently, the importance of experience and reflection in making sense of the physical and social settings where workplace based learning takes place. However, despite the robustness of the frameworks of Dewey and Kolb, neither provides rich accounts of the social and cultural environment of the workplace the learner is thrust into in the cooperative education model.

A number of learning theories can be brought together to amplify socio-cultural dimensions of learning. Foremost here are constructivist approaches to learning, and the influence of Vygotsky’s theories of how meaning is constructed by learners (1978). He considered that the social environment and the way that learners interacted with other people and objects within that environment were critical for learning. Taking these ideas further, a sociocultural perspective of
learning in the workplace positions meaning making as a situated, participatory and socially mediated activity (Eames & Bell, 2005). To this end, the workplace learner is understood to be ‘situated’ in a social context, undertaking authentic activities alongside practicing professionals in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Knowledge is accessed through interaction with a variety of people within the workplace wherein cultural knowledge (shared ways of knowing and being) is distributed across the community of practice (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). Through mediated action the socially and culturally derived artefacts, such as language, stories and other meaning making devices, which constitute the everyday practice of the workplace are shared between workplace colleagues and the learners.

While there is recognition of the socio-cultural dimensions of learning in cooperative education programs (Eames & Cates, 2011), very little research exists around the way these are developed and experienced. This paper employs the use of a socio-cultural perspective to explore the student learning experience in a sport cooperative education programme. The data presented here brings into relation the views and experiences of workplace learning through the reflections of students, industry supervisors and academic supervisors.

**Context of the study**

The context for this study was a cooperative education programme within the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The purpose of the cooperative education programme is to provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge and theory they have developed through their course to workplace settings. In short, the cooperative education program seeks to develop a range of vocational aptitudes and competencies that will make BSR graduates more attractive to future employers.

The cooperative education programme within the BSR involves students undertaking 350 hours of placement within one sport and recreation organisation over two semesters, each being fifteen weeks in duration. The placement is generally undertaken two days per week as a capstone programme during the final year of the degree. Within this arrangement the cooperative education experience makes up half of a full-time programme of study in the final year of the BSR. Students attend university classes for the other half of their load during this time. Through this concurrent placement structure there is an expectation that the insights and experiences gained by students during their work placement are integrated into their university-based program (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma, & Coll, 2010).

Within the BSR, students are responsible for negotiating their own work placements. This process is facilitated through an industry forum and advertisements from organisations. Workshops are
provided to assist students in preparation for their cooperative education experience. The students are supported in their cooperative education program by an industry supervisor and an academic supervisor. The industry supervisor is expected to negotiate appropriate work related activities for the students and to provide guidance, support and feedback in the workplace. Complementing this, students are expected to meet their academic supervisor on a regular basis (ideally every two weeks) for one-to-one mentoring. The key role of academic supervisors is to encourage the students to share their reflections, critically analyse, and make meaning from their experiences. Academic supervisors also provide comments on the student’s online journal and give feedback on assessment tasks.

The Study
An interpretive case study approach was used to generate rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of the three stakeholder groups (students, workplace supervisors and academic supervisors) and ultimately enhance understanding of the cooperative education program (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are a very common approach used in research in the area of work-integrated learning because of the highly contextualised nature of such programmes (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Linn, Howard, & Miller, 2004). A case can be defined as a phenomenon occurring within a bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A case study design draws the researcher to what is important about that case within its own world and aims to amplify recurring issues and themes from within the specifics of the case (Merriam, 1998). Using this approach Stake (1995) argues that case study researchers can generalise the themes generated through their case to inform other and future settings. Further to this, readers are invited to arrive at their own conclusions and generalisations.

The primary data for this research was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants from the three stakeholder groups, specifically, students (6), academic supervisors (5) and industry supervisors (5). The students interviewed had undertaken their placements at a range of workplace settings. These included a national sports organisation; a regional sports organisation; a professional sports club and an outdoor recreation company. Two students completed their placements at different schools, one in the physical education and sport department and the other in the outdoor education department. None of the students interviewed had worked full time in the sport and recreation industry prior to their cooperative education experience. Some, however, had undertaken volunteer roles such as coaching or assisting with event management activities. All students interviewed had completed the minimum 350 hours of industry placement where none had been paid by their host organisation during these placements.
The five academic supervisors interviewed had a range of experiences in supervising cooperative education students. One academic had just completed her first year as a lecturer and supervisor while two others had supervised in the cooperative education program for over ten years.

All of the five industry supervisors interviewed had supervised a student placement for at least one academic year. The range was between one and nine years of industry supervision. All participants were employed in senior or management roles within their respective organisations. The organisations and roles included, a regional sports trust (Fundamental Skills Advisor); School (Sports Director); a not-for profit recreation organization (Operations Manager) and two different regional sports organisations (Competitions Manager, High Performance Manager).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were analysed using content and thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pseudonyms were allocated to the participants, beginning with (S) for students, (I) for industry supervisors and (A) for academic supervisors.

**Findings**

The findings presented in this section of the paper focus on how the social environment of the workplace contributed to learning. In particular, we present a range of comments that provide some insight into the various ways that workplace knowledge was transferred through the non-formal engagements and interactions of participants. In presenting this data we draw on the undistorted voices of participants.

Students reported learning through becoming part of a supportive workplace environment that provided meaningful activities and enabled them to develop a ‘sense of belonging’. Most students, although at times admitted that they were exposed to the more routine activities, were given tasks, areas of responsibility and roles that were significant within the organisation. For example, Stan described his role:

_I was not there just to be a helping hand. I had jobs to do. I took the fitness training on a Friday morning. I coached the rugby, touch and softball teams. I helped out on any P.E trips._

_So it was like I did have a role and it was not just odd jobs that they made me do._

Stan also felt he was part of the organisation and that he “had a say in what he was there to do”. Developing a sense of belonging in the school came from being able to exercise professional agency where he had the capacity for choice, responsibility and self-direction in relation to his own learning. Sonia valued that the industry supervisor ensured that the activities she was involved with were authentic as well as relevant to what she needed and wanted to learn for her degree. While initially
she “felt like a visitor” that feeling changed once they got busy and as she realised “by proving you can perform you become part of the organisation”. Being made to feel welcome was important to Sally, but she acknowledged that she also needed to make an effort as well:

I appreciated that they made me feel really welcome from the start. However, I realised that I had to learn how I could apply myself and make myself part of the team in order to be successful.

Ian, an industry supervisor, also had the view that it was important that the student had the right personal attributes to become part of the team. Students needed to work alongside and develop appropriate personal relationships with their more experienced colleagues in the workplace. As Ian commented:

It is important to us that they have the right personality to fit into the team. We have some fairly experience people here, experienced coaches that are former professional players who do not stand any nonsense and so the student has to live up to their expectations.

Through participating in the authentic activities of the workplace community students were able to understand ‘what it is really like’. For example, Sean gained a wider appreciation of what the role of a high performance trainer really involved:

I learnt how it really works in industry, so it is not just writing programmes or just giving something to the athletes and letting them do their thing. You are more involved; you are almost like a motivator as well. You see that the athletes are with the strength and conditioners and high performance team more than the actual coaches. So you get to know the athletes quite well.

Steve, through his experience in a school, became aware of the reality perspective, “I learnt what it is like to be a teacher, a teacher’s life is hard”. Through being immersed in a school he was able to gain an understanding of “the way of a professional [teacher], their standard of dress, way of speaking, way of writing”. In this social context Steve was able to then learn the ‘tools’ (Vygotsky, 1978) that are part of the everyday practice of being a teacher.

Students described that they learnt through observing, or being shown by colleagues or their supervisor and then doing. The initial observations helped students to learn the behaviours that were part of the workplace culture and helped them to understand ‘what to do’. This is similar to Bandura’s (1977) concept of modelling. For example, Sean described the way he learnt:

When I was first there I was obviously in the corner, I did not want to interrupt... I learnt by me following them, getting to know everyone, because it is quite hard being a new person in the industry that is already established. They have already established what they do, their
routines that kind of thing and someone new coming in can be quite difficult... In the first few weeks I was just following and eventually I started to get more involved, it came gradually and by at least halfway through the year I was more part of the team... I took on a key role as an assistant trainer ...., and then had a free licence around the gym.

Sean learnt first from watching and following the high performance trainer (the ‘expert’) as well as other work colleagues. Sean’s comments are an example of the importance of interactions with workplace colleagues and reflect the process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sean as a ‘newcomer’, started as legitimate but peripheral member of the community and slowly over time, as he became more proficient, he became closer to being a full participant and being enculturated into the community of practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Eames & Coll, 2010).

Taking on more responsibility and being given challenging roles enabled the students to extend their learning. As Sally confessed in the response below she learnt by challenging herself to move outside her comfort zone and by making mistakes:

I learnt through moving outside my comfort zone and doing things I was not sure about. I also made myself do things and attempt to do things even though I sometimes sure of what I was doing, but I did do that. It helped me to learn from my mistakes and how I could do things better.

Sally also acknowledged that her attitude to learning was important. What and how much can be learned is strongly influenced by personal motivation. However, intrinsic motivation can be stimulated through, “tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, that are relevant to personal interests and provide for personal choice and control” (Schunk, 2009, p. 267). In Isaac’s view not all students had the same attitude and level of motivation:

The challenges are there, you get your students who are quite street smart and get straight into it and then you get students that just sit back and expect work to come their way...The students that just sit there doing nothing, there is no room for that and they learn that very quickly.

Industry and academic supervisor agreed that attitude was the greatest influence on ‘what and how’ the students learnt.

Professional interactions and relationships with others within the workplace community of practice were seen as important for learning to occur. Irene (a school sports director), described the wide range of interactions that her co-op students were exposed to:
They are learning from interactions with the [school] students, they are learning from their peers [in the same placement organisation], they are learning from other coaches and teachers around us. They are learning from me. They are learning from the clubs and the RST’s about how to facilitate their programmes [in the school]. They are learning from the parents and all our other staff.

Facilitating the socialisation of the student into the workplace was considered a critical role of the industry supervisor. Adam expressed this view when talking about what contributed to a good learning experience:

*It is all of the little things where the industry supervisor has taken the time to make sure the students are introduced to all the people in the place and so when they walk around they know everyone’s name and they get invited to the social functions and they get invited to the staff meetings and you know, all that, simple stuff is what makes co-op work.*

Learning involves more than just ‘having the experience’. The conversations and interactions with supervisors (both industry and academic), co-workers and peers was acknowledged as contributing to the way in which students were able to reflect on and make meaning from their experiences. As Sally mentioned, “talking about my experiences with others, talking about what I was doing and how I could do things better, helped me to learn”. Susie also considered the importance of dialogue. Susie described the way she learnt:

*How I learnt was by asking questions and talking to people. Initially I was told what to do and then left to do it on my own. As I progressed they started to ask me what I thought.*

Initially the more experienced workers provided Susie with support through allocating her work and answering her questions. This illustrates the notion of ‘situated cognition’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where Susie was drawing on the resources of the environment and expertise of her peers. Through talking to others she was able to access specific knowledge that was situated within the context of where she needed to apply that knowledge. As Susie became more competent she was left on her own to work independently. As time progressed she moved towards developing recognised expertise and was then invited to share her experience and knowledge with others.

The development of informal relationships and experiences outside the normal day-to-day activities also contributed to learning within the workplace. Stan highlighted how he valued the social interactions with other staff:

*I got to do the staff kind of things like going to the staff BBQ. So hanging out with the teachers, getting that whole side of it, seeing not just the ‘in classroom’ experience but the whole community of the school, getting to know the Principal as well, who had an open door so I could just walk in and out and go and see her if I felt like it.*
He also appreciated having access to experienced colleagues (including the school Principal) who had vast knowledge and expertise. Another student, Sean, commented that being able to play sport with his workplace colleagues was also valuable in, “making him feel accepted and part of the workplace culture”.

Much of what we learn we learn from others and as Vygotsky (1978) stresses, language should be considered as the supreme psychological tool that enables the acquisition of skills and higher forms of learning possible. For the students to understand how to practice in the sport and recreation community they acknowledged that they needed to understand the language of the workplace and the professional behaviours that were appropriate. Commenting on her experience Susie noted:

> You definitely have to be an effective communicator to get the message across and sometimes I did not realise how much you had to simplify things for some people because they are not necessarily going to know where you are coming from and they do not automatically know what you are talking about.

Most students acknowledged that learning through participation and interaction in the social environment of the workplace was a distinct component of the industry learning they experienced. Steve captured this in commenting that, “As I became a part of the furniture of the school, it was different from how I learnt at uni, it was more learning from other teachers, other people rather than learning from purely books”.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study support a socio-cultural view of learning that positions learning as a social process. Students learnt not only through participation in authentic workplace activities but also through a social interactive environment (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through moving between the academic community of practice and the workplace students were able to gain access to procedural knowledge (knowing how) and dispositional knowledge (values and attitudes), (Billett, 2009). In so doing they were able to develop discipline specific skills while simultaneously deepening their contextual understanding of what it means to be a ‘professional’ in the sport and recreation industry. Deep industry learning was seen to occur as a result of engaging in the socio-cultural dimensions of the workplace when students moved outside their comfort zones and through informal interactions with work colleagues.

Here, learning occurred through social mediation (Eames & Coll, 2010), in that students were situated alongside other more experienced co-workers (Rogoff, 1995) in a similar way to a ‘cognitive apprenticeship’ (Brown et al., 1989). Knowledge was transferred through close or direct guidance by supervisors or co-workers who told or showed the students what to do (Billett, 2001). Students also
accessed knowledge through indirect guidance, where they had the opportunity to observe the actions and behaviours of their colleagues in the workplace (Bandura, 1977). Ideally, to maximise learning in this way, students need to be critically engaged so that potentially divisive workplace cultures are not unwittingly reproduced.

Through a process of ‘mediated action’ co-workers and supervisors provided access to important industry ‘tools’ (Vygotsky, 1978) such as language and disposition. These ‘tools’ enabled them to access and decode socially and culturally derived artefacts (Eames & Coll, 2010) that contribute towards an understanding of what it means to be a professional in the sport and recreation industry. Gradually over the course of the experience, students moved from legitimate peripheral participation to full members of the community of practice (Brown et al., 1989; Eames & Coll, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Conclusion and implications**

Looking at learning in cooperative education through a socio-cultural lens recognises that when students arrive at a workplace setting they enter a distinct community of practice. Being situated alongside workplace colleagues, students are able to gain access to tacit knowledge and behaviours that make up the professional environment. It is through these social interactions in the workplace and participation in activities that are ‘normal’ to the profession that students begin to understand and take-on the desired characteristics of the workplace community (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As such, successful integration into the workplace includes not only how well students can pick-up the technical ‘knowledge and skills of the trade’, but also how well they adapt to the culture, values and expectations of the community. As students transit from being peripheral to full members of the community they become socialised into particular forms of professional identity. These constructions of identity are, of course, fluid and unstable. Through the practices of critical reflection and other forms of identity deconstruction students are invited to play an active role in framing their own professional identity.

One implication of this work is that universities need to prepare students to effectively interact with the different socio-cultural demands of the workplace environment. Both academic and industry supervisors need to be attuned to the learning opportunities that occur within the social context of the workplace and the importance of nurturing meaningful interactions with others in the workplace. This research has emphasised the relational dimension of professional learning when cooperative education is conceptualised as a social process. To this end, we contend that it is greater consideration should be given to ensuring that, within cooperative education, students are active in
seeking meaningful discussions/interactions with workplace colleagues, and these are not simply left to chance.

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References


RP3

Power and employability – student’s experiences of powerlessness

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings from a Higher Education Academy funded project (January 2012 – April 2013) entitled ‘Developing a variety of approaches to work placement to enhance knowledge and skills for employability’ which focused on three different approaches to undergraduate students’ experience of placement in schools during the second year of their studies. The paper posits a neoliberal presence in higher education. Predominant themes from the data include concerns about the influence of external obligations in shaping practice learning and consequently the importance of peer support in enabling learning and in enhancing employability. External obligations foster a credentialist approach, where students seek advantage over others by having an opportunity that enables them to foreground ‘desirable’ skills, competence and personal attributes (Tomlinson, 2008), and relegates learning, authority and autonomy, thus raising concern of employability as a political technology. This also means that students lack power and, in this work placement context, the voice of the end user, the pupil, is silent. Findings suggest that collegiality is helpful in enabling students to work within a more holistic notion of employability.

Introduction

Since the 1980’s the ‘social revolution’ that has framed employability in the public sector has been neoliberalism. This has involved a significant shift in the State’s relationship with workers so that the former wields unrivalled power through semi-autonomous agencies such as The Teaching Agency and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). In this regulatory context professionals working with children and young people in the public sphere have no choice but to engage with the managerialist, performative agenda (Ball 2003). In the public sector employability is immanently political.

For universities too, Scott (2012) has recognised the ‘slow car crash’ (p.2) of regulation and guidance in which external bodies funded by government, such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England, reinforce governmentality yet assert that academics will seek to critique and counter the prevailing hegemony. There is a dilemma for academics therefore who are concerned about the efficacy and workability of reforms ‘but occupy roles that force them to engage with the implementation of the Government’s proposals’. There is a need for academics to avoid the ‘treason
of the clerks’ (Benda 1927/2006) and to work to develop graduates who can challenge orthodoxy yet work within it. The responsibility is not only professional but moral since, in public sector work, the end users of the labour of our graduates include the vulnerable in society.

My own, on-going research reveals high levels of concern about a shift in the relationship between teachers and their pupils so that they are expected to care about the pupil in terms of progress rather than caring about the whole child. Students undertaking work placement in school contexts are therefore potentially faced with a managerialist system that frames employability in terms of willingness to adapt to a regime focussed on such progress.

The purpose here is two-fold; the first is to problematize ‘employability’, not to define it as a problem, but to enhance understanding of the concept as a mediating power in developing the social relations between the State, universities, students and children and young people. Secondly, to seek an approach to work placement that balances the student’s expectations for employment with the academic concern for criticality that requires students to recognize children as people with equal rights; to look at them with respect, and to grasp what policies of many types mean for the opportunities and experiences of children and young people (Nussbaum, 2010, p.26).

Universities, neoliberalism and employability

This paper focusses on undergraduate students’ experience of placement in the second year of their studies on a BA (Hons) Childhood Studies programme. Childhood Studies comes under the auspices of studies in education and therefore has a broad interest in terms of work placement opportunities including schools, children’s centres, nurseries, prisons, and looked after young people. The placement is offered as an element of a module that is focussed on employability as part of the university’s commitment in meeting the objectives of the Dearing Report (1997) and later policy drivers and initiatives (UKCES 2008, 2009, 2010; CBI 2009; CBI/UUK 2009; Browne 2010; BIS 2011, HEFCE 2011). Thus curriculum and pedagogical practices reflect prevailing structural, ideological and student demands, but also seeks to challenge these, since:

The idea that human sciences like educational studies stand outside or above the political agenda of the management of the population or somehow have a neutral status embodied in a free-floating progressive rationalism are dangerous and debilitating conceits.

(Ball 1997, 271)

Marketization and neoliberalism have been recognised as particular issues in the education sector for many years. In this context, Biesta (2004) raises a concern for the ‘deprofessionalization’ of the
relationship between tutors and students so that universities have been positioned as providers of a service and students as consumers of that service. The outcome for tutors is that the ideological foundation for employability, as an aspect of their labour, is based on social efficiency, where the 'culture of accountability makes it very difficult for the relations between ...students and educators/institutions to develop into mutual, reciprocal, and democratic relationships' (Biesta 2004, 249).

The period from the 1980’s is particularly significant since during this period, accountability was promoted as a form of empowerment (Power 1994, 1997). In this regard empowerment was seen as the universities’ ability to respond to the new audit agenda by taking the mantle of reform from the political sphere and perpetuating and developing it from within. In schools empowerment is seen by inspectors as the ability of teachers to achieve pupil progress. Following Foucault, Shore and Wright (1999, p.558) have argued that audit is therefore part and parcel of ‘political technology’, ‘a relationship of power between scrutinizer and observed’ [original emphasis], or indicative of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault 1991). Universities have become environments of ‘otherness’ (Bauman 2002, 2008; Biesta 2004) between the constituents, managers, academics and students, where, to draw on Strathern (1997), neoliberal practices ‘reduces professional relations to crude, quantifiable and, above all, 'inspectable' templates’ (Shore and Wright 1999, p.557). As such ‘autonomy’, ‘trust’ and ‘collegial or democratic governance in flat structures’ is replaced by ‘hierarchical forms of authoratively structured relation’ (Olssen and Peters 2005, p.324-325) and consequently, the universities themselves mirror the managerialist structures students will encounter on placement in public service settings.

As universities respond and restructure themselves to meet the demands of the predominant ideology they are also a means through which the neoliberal agenda is perpetuated; that is, one in which students are prepared for being entrepreneurial and economically productive members of society; a society in which the roles, autonomy and definitions of ‘professional’ are also restructured through relations of competition, productivity, accountability and control (ibid). For Nussbaum (2010) and Ravitch (2010, p.72) the twin conceits of organisational restructuring, and curricula and pedagogical restructuring represent a challenge to democracy and are the antithesis in producing ‘a certain type of citizen: active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure’. Following Freire, Marta Baltodano (2012, p.490) argues that, ‘the banking concept of education sanctioned by neoliberalism’ is training students to become ‘docile citizens’, and consequently, uncritical approaches to employability simply support ‘the appropriation of universities as cultural spaces’ (ibid, p.495) (my emphasis).
Baltadano raises a contradiction of the personal and professional selves for students; as ‘docile citizens’ who are exposed to a narrative of freedom, choice and empowerment in education, yet the system is tightly regulated, governed and situated by government as crucial to the production of human capital and wealth. In this way the predominant narrative is used to frame what are desired, appropriate and valued ‘modes of action’, that is; ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed’ (Foucault 1994, p. 341). Students and the children who they come to work with have little or no say in what are seen as desired and desirable attributes.

The shift from the political and ideological sphere to one where the individual is tied to the state through systems of policing and control is an important critique of the neoliberal agenda in higher education with relevance for the contemporary requirement for employability. It is in this context that Ball (2003) focuses on the ‘terrors of performativity’ for education professionals and, subsequently, creeping privatisation in education (Ball, 2009); both of which have been important in achieving a shift in the purpose of higher education so that universities are seen now as central to the development of fit for purpose graduates for the knowledge economy and economic prosperity as a whole (Olssen and Peters, 2005). It is in these circumstances that Giroux (2002, p. 425) views ‘neoliberalism (as) the most dangerous ideology of the current historical moment’ since it involves a shift in structural and cultural functions from shared and collegiate practices to those that produce self-interested individuals.

The key concern is not that universities should not have business relationships or relationships with business and wider stakeholders, indeed there is a tradition of this; it is that there has been a shift in the terms of power, role and responsibilities in relationships between the State, employers, universities, students, and children and young people, in the production of ‘human capital’ (Yorke & Knight 2007). In this prevailing hierarchical regime who is asking the children and young people what they think a good professional is?

**Methodology**

In seeking to problematize employability and to explore an approach to work placement that balances competing stakeholder demands there is a need to understand students’ experience of becoming employable. An ‘extended case method’ (Burawoy et al, 2000) was utilised, since the method:
Takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider social structures (p.282).

Burawoy et al (1991) also argue that:

As observers who also stand outside the life worlds they study, scientists can gain insight into the properties of the system world, which integrates the intended and unintended consequences of instrumental action into relatively autonomous institutions. (p. 284).

The potential is therefore that the researcher can understand two worlds: that of the individual and people in doing their work, and that of the system from which theories of powerful mediating technologies can be understood. So, there is potential, for example, to develop understanding of how employability (as an external mediating force) comes to dominate or be resisted by those labouring under its reach. However, this is problematic since, if students are ‘docile citizens’ (op cit.), accepting employability as an external mediating technology only serves to reinforce their lack of power and commitment. The research explicitly sought empowerment of students as partners. The imperative was therefore to ensure an ethical approach in the management and participation of the project as well as at an ontological level in revealing and researching the ‘problematic’ (Smith, 2005), student’s experience of employability through work placement. The latter necessitates working from the standpoint of the student’s experience and not imposing or articulating any objective or normalising concepts as present or relevant. The terms inherent in neoliberalism were not used by the participants; however their talk and other data reveal a powerful mediating presence.

Smith (1987, 1990, 2005) posits a social ontology in which the lived experiences of participants are central to exposing ruling relations inherent in institutional texts. In researching students’ experiences of work placement, for example, there is no prior assumption of the meaning or mechanisms of employability since to do so would be to objectify the participants to this sociological discourse. Instead, employability is only explored in how it is subsequently exposed through talk, observation and other means in the field. The literature is not offered ‘to reveal objective states, [but as an aid in locating] and tracing the points of connections among individuals working in different parts of institutional complexes of activity’ (DeVault & McCoy 2002, p. 753). The purpose is not to generalise but to consider literature; texts and processes that have generalising effects.

A ‘case study’ approach was adopted and adapted utilising Smith’s social ontology. The standpoint was that of the student and how their employability experience on placement came to be socially
constructed and co-ordinated. Understanding of the students’ experience was achieved through rich descriptions. The strength of case study is that it can take an example of activity and use multiple methods of data collection to interrogate it (Stark and Torrance, 2005, p.33). Data collection included: interviews, students’ written accounts, mentor reports, and tutor observations made during work placement visits. These methods foregrounded the student’s experience of the social interactions of how employability was articulated and co-ordinated as an aspect of their work.

Data was gathered from the experiences of three groups of six students, each group undertaking a work placement in a school but managed in a different way to the others. Each work placement was for a minimum of 120 hours, typically one day per week over an academic term:

- Group one. Students individually undertook a work placement with different school and mentor. This was a common work placement scenario.
- Group two. Students worked in partnership with an identified school utilising problem based learning and a change project. They were not classroom based and worked across the school.
- Group three. Students worked individually but in a single setting. Each individual was part of the school community and there was no requirement that they undertake any group work with each other.

**Findings**

Each group undertook their work placement in schools and gained, in their view, “good” experience that helped them better understand the context of work with children and young people and the particular demands of the job. The data reveals key differences, however, in each group’s and individual’s experience of employability.

All of the students participated in their work placement under the mediating power of the national curriculum, the vestiges of The Every Child Matters agenda (DfES 2003) and the standards and requirements of the regulator, Ofsted (2010, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). This was particularly evident for the six individual students, as borne out in work placement reports and mentor comments that foregrounded skills, attributes and attainment arising from these externally imposed standards. These students acted in the capacity of teaching assistants, not trainee teachers, and were expected to demonstrate evidence in practice of both pedagogy and relationships with individuals, groups of children and the wider school community. However, where there was recognition about the student’s attainment in developing positive relationships with children, mentors focussed on relationship as a pedagogical device, in helping to achieve desired learning
outcomes, rather than as a social and emotional, or widely defined caring attribute. In this context the caring aspect of relationship was emphasised as an organizing exchange between pupil and student; as both work (doing care) and progress orientated (Ruddick, 1998).

Notions of good practice and employability were consistently based upon pupil progress and the management of behaviour. This is unsurprising since the regulator’s guidance states that judgements about the quality and effectiveness of education are based upon:

- achievement of pupils at the school
- quality of teaching in the school
- behaviour and safety of pupils at the school
- quality of the leadership in and management of the school.

(Ofsted, 2012)

Quality of teaching is constructed on the basis of pupil outcomes. Where a pupil’s behaviour was in opposition to these key judgements they were seen as ‘other’ and as a barrier to the learning of the many. Students, at times, were involved in working with pupils on a one to one basis or in small groups as an exercise in exclusion rather than inclusive education. Students found it difficult to question or discuss this approach to education and were effectively powerless to demonstrate alternative pedagogies or a wide set of skills, knowledge or attributes. It was consistently a student’s ability to work to achieve pupil progress that competence was set. Consequently, the relevance for the student’s experience of work and how they come to be employable is a fundamental reconfiguration of the ‘relationship between the state and its citizens’ (Biesta 2004, 237) and of pedagogy and care.

While the students enjoyed ‘doing’ work they found the experience to be a lonely and frustrating both practically and philosophically. They were isolated from other students and unable to develop an effective approach to evaluating and criticising practice through peer support. They also understood how the imposition of standards and notions of “good practice” were objectifying of them and the children – no one asked them or the children what makes a good practitioner! The majority of students accepted the terms of their experience as necessary to gain the right type of experience, the right type of mentor reference, to give them an advantage in the jobs market. Some made the decision that pursuing career in education was not for them. All of the students agreed they had more to offer than was valued in the terms set by powerful mediating, external forces. Creativity was stifled, there was little opportunity to work collegiately or collectively, and most important of all, relationship was constructed as a feature of normalising practice.

An individualist discourse of responsibility and the requirement for a disciplined and “docile” (Baltodano, 2012) entrepreneurial self are both of national and international concern. Governments
combine structural power to control the population for economic activity (Gill, 2008). Indeed Mitchell (2006), as an example, reveals how the European Commission has undertaken ‘a steady movement... towards an individualist discourse of responsibility for lifelong learning and the constant mobilization of work skills’ (p.392). It was this that most frustrated the group of students working in a school as a team on a change project, in the sense that they had a collective experience but not one that enabled them to demonstrate their individual attributes – an individual work placement was more desirable. Indeed the primacy of individualist practice was reinforced for them when, despite planning, agreement for the project, and acknowledgement of the benefit for pupils and the school, participating pupils were not released from lessons by teachers who voiced concern about pupils’ progress. From this, the students felt that the teachers did not value their contribution and found it increasingly difficult to appreciate the knowledge and skills they were developing collectively and became concerned that they were not exposed to a classroom experience necessary for employment. They began to fracture as a team.

The continuing rise of the power of the market in a neoliberal state has underpinned the status of individual responsibility and individualism so much that Bauman (2008, 3) views moves from the ‘principle of the communally endorsed, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences’ to emphasis on ‘individual fault’ and ‘private worry’ (6) as the basis of a modern day ‘social evil’. Whilst Bauman acknowledges the emotive and perhaps unhelpful nature of the latter term his focus is on how the diminution of the social state and the modern concern for consumerism and individualism (and all that entails) leads to a state of cognitive dissonance. Resentment is inevitable, he argues; ‘whenever there is a gap between the extent of formal rights and the material ability to fulfil them’ (Bauman, 2008, p. 5).

In the second placement context employability skills were accumulated but the fluid and increasingly contracting nature of the jobs market lead to concerns about employment and the threat of unfulfilled expectations. For this group of students, social recognition for efforts and achievements, reassurance about the relevance of the experience for their future, skills enhancement and the ‘right’ attitude (Garsten & Jacobsson 2004) were not enough. Continuing development of employability skills in an individualistic, normalising context was seen as a means for the individual to achieve dignity and avoid humiliation. Bauman (2008, p.11) cites the following definition of humiliation:

the act is humiliating if it forcefully overrides or contradicts the claim that particular individuals ... are making about who they are and where and how they fit in’ (consequently),
a person feels humiliated when s/he is brutally shown, by words, actions or events, that they cannot be what they think they
are ... Humiliation is the experience of being unfairly, unreasonably and unwillingly pushed down, held down, held back or pushed out (Smith 2006, pp.28-39)

Where humiliation is felt by students on work placement it does not suggest an empowering or enabling experience. ‘Care’ came to mean care of the self. They worked collectively but not collegiately and they became focussed on wanting to meet their own needs. Peers and pupils were ‘other’ insofar as they were necessary to demonstrate desirable skills. Employability was socially constructed.

The relationship between work placement focussed on regulatory obligation, and student/professional authority and autonomy is a matter of degree and power. Thus where the employability agenda is set at national and international level by policy makers and employers and subsequently endorsed by universities, and when employment is of individual responsibility, authority and autonomy is diminished in favour of externally set obligations (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). The students who worked individually were pleased to have demonstrated competence against the desired externally set obligations; the students who worked as a team on the change project had more authority and autonomy but were frustrated in light of the powerful mediating effect of the external obligations. Authority and autonomy were set aside and were of value only if they enabled access to experience and evidence of attainment against these obligations.

Data from the third group showed that they were able to achieve greater balance between evidencing external obligations and being an autonomous, critically reflective practitioner. This group worked individually in a classroom in the morning and negotiated permission to work together in the afternoon on a project across the school. The crucial element of their experience was the capacity to work out from within the classroom, as Scott (2012) suggests, from the ‘inside’, to develop understanding of: the prevailing mediating obligations, their need for an individualistic experience, and the teacher’s concern for pupil progress, in a shared space for collegiality, creativity and diverse approaches to pedagogy. When working individually their feedback was similar to that of their peers in group one; however, the presence of other students in the setting enabled them to reconcile powerful mediating obligations with a critical ‘anti’ approach – an employability/anti-employability dialogue. Being part of a group was crucial to achieving this since it enabled them to evaluate their individual experience collectively and to consequently present and speak with greater authority and autonomy collegiately. They were able to experience and demonstrate skills and abilities in negotiation with each other, the professionals in the school and, importantly, with the pupils. The key difference between this group and their peers was the space they achieved to think about and work with employability, to challenge the social construction, and to apply this
understanding to reconceptualise the concept. Practically, the other groups experienced employability as teaching for pupil progress; this was true for the third group also; however, their understanding went beyond ‘teaching’ to encapsulate ‘education’ and ‘learning’ and a more holistic practice.

**Conclusion**

Unsurprisingly this focus on the agenda of external forces, in particular Ofsted, in defining quality practice and employability focused on pupil progress, has not met with universal consensus. The primacy of the market and successive neoliberal policies have seen the job market in education become more uncertain, with tenure of employment increasingly reserved for those who have the appropriate and continually developing knowledge and skills biography that evidences or assures pupil progress. A conditional jobs market requires those seeking employment and those training future practitioners to accept, arguably, questionable practices. Choice is being removed from the individual student on placement in a classroom as the collective and social responsibility for pupil progress is now understood as a risk to be managed by the individual. Garsten and Jacobsson (2004, p. 8) argue that employability, ‘denotes the capacity of individuals to adapt to the demands of employment. This requires skills enhancement, continuous learning and also, according to one discourse, showing the “right” attitudes (initiative, flexibility, availability)’. Future income and status are therefore a function of their own particular levels of knowledge, skill, and willingness to work with the normalising practices required by regulatory and legislative bodies. A lack of such willingness risks unemployment and sets the student seeking employment as individually responsible and without power.

Numerous philosophical approaches to education inform the content of university practice placement modules yet many educationalists follow Sylva (1987) to argue that, ‘education is about nurturing the moral, aesthetic and creative aspects in children's development, not about "getting the country somewhere”’. Many education professionals struggle to work outside the external obligations. As a consequence one tension in the focus on skills and abilities for employability is that students are part and parcel of the transformation and redesign of the way people work. The structures of work are changing and students are co-opted as agents of change through the employability agenda and the concomitant responses of university programmes, that is, to convert and be converted. Employability is socially constructed. In public education contexts, valued practice and experience is coming to mean taking care of pupil attainment and care of self. In this market, the danger is that the student lacks power, and the end user, the pupil, is voiceless. Parochialism and essentialism are apparent. The alternative is to develop an approach with students and pupils at the centre so that their need for employment is balanced with an educational experience of the
‘common good’ (Baltodano 2012, p. 489). This is achieved by the student working from the ‘inside’ out.

By parochialism I mean two things; firstly that, ‘employability’ is a significant interest of politicians, employers, academics and employability professionals with other stakeholders, such as students or children and young people, at times being passive recipients of its inherent technologies or being ignored altogether. Secondly, there is a significant literature on the development of a conservative, neoliberal education system (for example: Ball 1998, 2009; Giroux 2002; Hill 2002, 2003, 2004) and within such as system notions of employability, allied to choice, are proffered as crucial selling points in the economic exchange for higher education between students, universities, employers, and the State. Yet in this exchange the State has significant power, less so the universities and less again, the student. The discourse of employability and choice hide wider social dynamics and for universities have come to mean satisfying individual students’ wants as consumers of education rather than the more democratic notion of higher education as a liberal environment for the generation and dissemination of knowledge (Biesta 2004). It is a system of vested economic interests.

The concern to avoid essentialism is rather more straightforward; not to problematize employability is to cede power to controlling interests, with the potential to over simplify an important aspect of higher education provision and student experience. Employability is more than a number of dyadic relationships – university/student, student /employer, student/child - there are many more variables such as gender, class, race, et cetera (which are not discussed in this paper) that move employability out of the shallows into deeper understandings. It is incumbent on us all to seek a deeper understanding and experience for our students, to avoid social relationships that are individualistic, parochial and essentialist. An approach to this is to work with the individual’s wants and needs but to create a space for collegiality and consideration of a wider, more holistic stance.

References


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How to enhance your degree: the value of placements and work based learning

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Abstract
This research builds upon a data trawling exercise in which the pedagogical outcomes of student experiences were measured in terms of completion of a formal work-based placement. In total, 195 students from the two universities were surveyed using a qualitative survey tool. In addition to the qualitative survey, a semi-structured Focus Group interview was conducted with eight final year engineering students all of whom had completed a year-long accredited placement.

This report brings together research conducted with two very different groups of students. As a consequence of this it is possible to identify a number of key issues and challenges common across disciplines. Whilst two different methodological tools were used to gather data, the inductive nature of the study has enabled the researchers to draw together a number of recommendations based upon the study findings.

Introduction
Within an increasingly competitive global environment, graduate employment is perhaps more important now for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) than ever before. Indeed, when looking across the UK Higher Education Sector, the notion of ‘employable graduates’ appears pivotal to Higher Education marketing. Despite this, questions remain with regards to exactly ‘how’ HEIs can provide their students with key employability skills and, in doing so, give them a ‘competitive advantage’ within the graduate market. Building on the findings of a large ‘data-trawling’ exercise in which the pedagogical outcomes of student experiences were measured with regards to completion of a formal work-placement, (Green, Jones, Higson & Andrews 2012) – this research aims to explore students’ perceptions of the value of formal work-based learning in enhancing and developing individual employability. In order to achieve this aim, qualitative surveys were administered to 195 students in two different UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Of the students surveyed, just over half had completed a placement year as part of their studies.
Three main themes emerged out of the data: the influences on student choice of university, issues around finding a placement and, students’ perceptions of the placement.

Given the unprecedented changes currently occurring across the UK Higher Education sector and the need to attract new students, the various influences on student choice of university are of particular interest (DEEWAR, 2009 and Johnson, 2010). This study found that for those students who undertook a placement, the opportunity to do so was a significant influencer determining their choice of university. For those students who did not do a placement, however, that a ‘sandwich’ programme was offered held little influence.

This part of the study reinforces previous work with regards to the value of placements in terms of enhancing students’ employability (Driffield, Foster & Higson, 2011) – particularly in terms of developing ‘transferable skills and competencies’ (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Of particular note are the Focus Group findings which reveal that the engineering students interviewed had, in their various organisations, been given considerable responsibility. This enabled them to develop their technical skills as engineers, but also provided valuable experience in leadership and ‘real-life’ decision-making, as well as affording the opportunity for them to further develop their interpersonal skills. For the Focus Group participants, the challenges associated with the placement experience mainly related to ‘people-management’ with their age and inexperience meaning that they had to learn to act in a reflexive and tactful manner.

The final part of the report outlines 10 recommendations aimed at HEIs, academic colleagues, careers services, students and employers, providing a rationale for each recommendation. The report concludes that it is the ‘developmental’ aspects of the placement that are the most valuable for students; mainly in terms of personal growth, but also in relation to the augmentation of technical and vocational skills.

**Methodology**

The research upon which this report is based occurred over a four month period in two HEIs in the UK. In the first part of the study a total of 195 students from the two universities were surveyed using a qualitative survey tool. Of these, 96 had completed a period of work-based learning as part of their education, whilst 99 had not. The first part of the survey concentrated on the factors influencing students’ choices of university. Following this, different questions were asked to each group with those who had completed a placement being asked to reflect upon their experiences of placement; and those who had not, being asked to reflect upon their experiences of part-time work.
The findings in relation to part-time work are not included in this report which concentrates instead on the factors influencing student choice and the placement experience.

In addition to the qualitative survey, a semi-structured Focus Group interview was conducted with eight final year engineering students all of whom had completed a year-long accredited placement. All of these students were studying Chemical Engineering at University A.

An overview of the demographics of the sample, in terms of university, subject studied and gender is given in Figures 1 and 2 below.

**Figure 1: Demographic Details: Students included in the survey who had completed a formal period of work-based learning (Placement)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects:</th>
<th>University A: 12 students</th>
<th>University B: 84 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Sociology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Business Studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Policy &amp; IR</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Policy &amp; Business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology &amp; English</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>22-25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Figure 2: Demographic Characteristics: Students included in the survey who had not completed a period of formal work-based learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects:</th>
<th>26 University A Students</th>
<th>73 University B Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combined Honours &amp; Sociology</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>Business Studies</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surveys were collated and analysed utilising qualitative techniques. Whilst the aim of qualitative research is to illicit a detailed response, many of the answers given in the qualitative survey comprised ‘one word’ sentences. When this occurred the data has been quantified and numbers, instead of quotes, are shown.

The Focus Group was recorded contemporaneously over a period of 1 hour and 10 minutes. It was then transcribed and analysed whereupon the main themes and sub-themes were identified.
Findings & Discussion: The Value of Formal Work-Based Learning Placements.
This part of the report comprises data captured from students who participated in focus group interviews as well as those who completed the qualitative survey. Where appropriate a comparison is made between the perspectives of those students who had completed a placement and those who had not.

Influences on Choice of University

- **Friends, Family & Careers Advisors**

  Around a third of the students surveyed stated that their families were the ones they talked to first when needing advice about which university to choose. Teachers and careers advisors at school played a slightly more significant role, with just under half of the students going to them ahead of family members (90 students: 46%). A minority of respondents (18 students: 9%) did not consult anyone before making their choice.

  Whilst the importance of ‘relational influencers’ contradicts recent research which points to the value of ‘social media’ in influencing students’ choices of university (Johnson, 2010), social media and peer influences were not mentioned as an influence at all in the study. Although parental and familial influence have previously been identified as relatively weak (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999), other work by Gibbons-Wood & Lane (1998), and Briggs (2006) places it as pivotal to the student decision making process. Given the differences of opinion within the literature, and taking into account the findings of this study, it is reasonable to postulate that the significance given to parental and family influence varies depending on a number of variables. Whilst it is difficult to identify from this study why parental, familial and teacher influences are important at the current time, it is possible that the socio-economic climate and changes in the way in which young people communicate are two factors.

- **Location as an Influence on Choice**

  Somewhat unexpectedly, none of the students who had completed a placement identified location as being important in their choice of university. This differs somewhat from those students who had not completed a placement, 51 of whom (48% of non-placement students and 26% of the overall sample) identified location as important. Likewise, six of the eight Focus Group participants, also stated that location was one of the main factors influencing their choice of university.

  With regards to the survey respondents, the differences in opinions between those students who had, and who had not, completed a placement in relation to the importance given to ‘location’ when
selecting a university is difficult to explain. One factor which may be relevant relates to part-time work; those who choose not to do a placement may have done so in order that they could keep their part time job. This argument supports evidence by DEEWR (2009) which suggests that half of undergraduates select their university on the basis of location – which in itself is influenced by a desire / need to retain part time employment.

- The Influence of the Placement on Students’ Choices of University

One of the first questions on the survey related to the influence that the offer of a placement had on undergraduates’ selection of University. The majority of students who had completed a placement (55 in total: 57% of this part of the sample, and 28% of the total) cited the offer of a work placement as being a major influence on their decision to go to university:

When examining the reasons as to why the offer of a work placement held a strong influence with regards to choice of university for those students who had selected to do a placement, employability proved to be the main influence, with around half of the survey respondents indicating that they believed a formal placement would provide valuable work experience and in doing so place them at an advantage when seeking employment following graduation.

Notably, the other part of the sample, those who had not undertaken placement, expressed opposite views with 62 respondents (64% of this part of the sample, 32% of the total) stating that the opportunity to do a placement was not a factor in their choice of university.

With regards to the focus group participants, only one of the eight stated that the opportunity to complete a placement was not an important in shaping their decision to study at Aston. For this individual the lack of priority given to the placement appeared to reflect his perceptions of the open day.

For the Focus Group participants, like the survey respondents, the opportunity to undertake a placement proved to be a major incentive for selecting the university, with employability being a factor:

*It was important in my choice... Aston has good links with industry.*

*It advertises it in the prospectus and on open-days*

(Male, Engineering, Age 22-25, FG)
Given the uncertainty in the current job market, and the changes to how Higher Education is funded, it is perhaps not surprising that students consider their future employment prospects when selecting a university. This in itself suggests that in order to attract new students, Higher Education Institutions need to be in a position so as to promote students’ employability (Rae, 2007). Indeed, the expectation that undergraduate programmes provide students with work-experience and work-related skills has possibly never been more important (for further discussion see Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Finding a Placement
From this point, the sample comprises those students who had completed a placement (N = 96) and the 8 Focus Group participants.

- Why do a Placement?
Having made the decision to do a work-placement, most of the survey respondents (64: 67%) indicated that they expected the placement to provide them with relevant work-related experience, directly linked to their chosen discipline or future career: Likewise, all of the Focus Group participants also identified the opportunity to gain real-life work experience as an incentive to do a placement:

A large Chemical Engineering firm came here and I thought, that’s for me.... it was sold to me as a year’s worth of experience, I thought
‘I could be earning’... and it would be a good thing.
(Male, Engineering, Age 22-25, FG)

The priority given to the opportunity to gain work-related skills and competencies by the survey respondents is indicative of the value that students put on the placement experience in terms of it providing a unique experiential learning opportunity in which theory can be put into practise (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh & Knight 2001; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragnolini, 2004)

Another, relatively smaller, motivation for those respondents who had completed a placement (10 students: 10%) related to the perception that doing placement as part of their course was the ‘norm’, students did not want to appear “abnormal” by not partaking in a placement. Although this was only a minor motivating factor, the need to embed the placement experience into the undergraduate programme so that it becomes the ‘norm’ is clearly something that HEIs need to consider.
- **Finding a Placement**

Whilst just over a third of those who had not completed a placement stated they had never intended to do so (31: 35%), difficulties in finding a placement was a significant factor influencing this particular group of students with a slightly higher number (34: 39%) indicating that they did not do a placement because they found it difficult to find something suitable. The reasons for such difficulties were generally not forthcoming, although a small number of students (7: 8%) stated that they had attended interviews but had been unsuccessful:

That some of those who had not completed a placement had not done so because they had ‘failed’ at the interview stage reiterates the need for universities to make sure that students are properly prepared for the recruitment process.

For those students who had completed a placement, input from the university proved to be an important factor with 54 (57%) indicating that their university had most helped by providing emails of placement details:

> *I felt very well supported. The university sent emails about new placement opportunities so we could apply*  
>  
> (Female, Marketing, Age 22-25)

A small group of students (9: 9%) stated that their Universities helped with their CVs, in terms of edited and improving them, as well as improving students interview skills. Of the eight Focus Group participants, four stated that they used the Careers Service and found it helpful:

Notably, around a fifth of the survey respondents (19: 20%) appeared disappointed with the university careers service, suggesting in their responses that they received little or no help in securing their placement. Similarly, one of the Focus Group participants had used the Careers Service but had not found this to be helpful:

The value of high quality careers advisory services to the student perspective and experience is discussed in the recent Government White Paper ‘Students at the Heart of the System’, which also briefly discusses the importance of internships and work-placements in equipping students with employability skills (BIS, 2011). That such a significant minority of the respondents who had successfully secured a placement expressed disappointment with their university careers service
only acts to reinforce the important role the careers service can play in assisting students find good, relevant work placements.

Reflections on the Placement Experience

- The importance of ‘soft’ and ‘technical’ skills

When asked to identify the skills they believed employers wanted placement students to possess, just over a fifth of those surveyed (21: 22%) identified confidence as one of the main attributes they felt employers seek. A similar number identified a good work ethic as important, whilst 12 (12.5%) identified a willingness to learn as important.

Students completing the survey also stated a smaller number of other attributes that they believe were important, such as “maturity,” “reliability,” “independence,” “initiative,” “transferable skills” and “communication skills.”

For the Focus Group participants, the issue of skills was expressed in more detail, reflective of the complicated manner in which students perceive employers’ expectations. Six of the four identified personal attributes and personality as being important:

Personally I think they want someone who’s all rounded… They want to see you not in the technical field, because everyone is more or less at the same level. But the soft skills. How you communicate. How you work in a group, get on with others. Behave.

(Male, Engineering, Age 22-25, FG)

In identifying ‘soft-skills’ as important, this project reinforces the findings of previous work much of which has identified the value of such transferable skills (see for example: McLarty, 1998; Tucker, Sojka, Barone, & McCarthy, 2000; Nabi, 2003; Elias & Purcell, 2004; Raybould & Sheard, 2005; Andrews & Higson, 2008). Likewise work undertaken by Little (2003) reiterates the importance of work-based learning to the development of a range of ‘softer’ skills such as communication and independent skills.

Whilst ‘interpersonal’ or soft skills were mentioned by all of the Focus Group participants, four of the eight also identified ‘technical knowledge’ and skills as being important:

I agree they want soft skills…. But when they were replacing
me they wanted someone with the technical knowledge who could do the job.

(Male, Engineering, Age 22-25, FG)

Whilst ‘technical’ knowledge and competencies were not raised by the survey respondents, that such skills were identified by engineering students is not unduly surprising. Indeed, the need to equip students with transferable ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ (technical) skills is discussed across much of the engineering education literature (Clark & Andrews, 2012; Krishnan, 2012).

- The overall value of the placement

An important aspect of the survey administered to those who had completed a placement focused on the students’ perceptions of the value of that placement. The majority of this group of respondents indicated that, overall, they felt the experience had been worthwhile (75 students: 78%). Additionally, 20 students (21%) specified that they found it challenging but rewarding.

Positive comments varied, but included several statements from students who indicated that the placement was the ‘best’ part of their course:

*My placement was the most amazing year of my life to date. I feel I have developed both professionally and personally from the experience.*

(Female, Marketing, Age 22-25)

A minority of the survey respondents stated that after the placement they feel more mature in their studies, with 8 students (8%) indicating this. Additionally, 11 students (11%) suggested that as a result of their placement they were ‘more focused’ in their approach to studying in the final year. Similarly, six of the Focus Group participants stated that the placement had a marked impact on their attitudes to study during the final year:

*The placement made me focus more on my studies. It improved my knowledge and my writing…*

(Male, Engineer, Age 22-25, FG)

- Personal & Professional Development: Responsibility & Leadership

For the Focus Group participants, the opportunities afforded by the placement represented a key learning experience, one in which all eight of them were given significant responsibilities, whilst one
described how he had been asked to lead a team of workers who were far more experienced than himself:

*My key achievement was finding out what I was capable of. I was allowed to manage across 5 plants. I met with my manager about half way through the placement and he said “we don’t usually allow placement students to do that sort of thing”. Managing some of the biggest projects in the company. My confidence shot up.*

(Male, Engineer, Age 22-25, FG)

This final quote highlights the value of leadership and team-working skills acquired whilst at university. Indeed, a significant number of the survey respondents (37: 39%) identified leadership and team-work as being the most important skills used, and further developed, whilst on placement. Other skills identified in the survey as being important whilst on placement included: communication skills; time management skills and accountability.

- **Contextualisation of theory and work**

Like the Focus Group participants, the majority of students surveyed recognised that by undertaking a placement they had managed to gain a valuable source of experience from which to draw. Indeed, the opportunity to link theory and practise was identified as important for the majority of survey respondents (64: 67%). Likewise, the Focus Group interviewees also discussed how the opportunity to contextualise learning represented a key aspect of their placement experience:

*For me it was seeing how all the things we do fit together. We do all separate modules, then seeing how they all come together in a real plant... you get a better picture of how it all works*

(Male, Engineer, Age 22-25, FG)

- **Challenges & Negative Aspects of Placements.**

For the survey respondents, the most challenging part of the placement reflected difficulties in securing the placement in the first place. Additionally, 10 of the 96 (10%) who had completed their placement articulated some negative aspects of their placement including: boredom; a lack of opportunity to use their skills; and, not ‘liking’ the area in which they were placed. Of those who did
comment negatively, 4 stated that the negative experience had spurned them on to achieve in their final year – so as to avoid getting a job that was similar to their placement.

All of the Focus Group participants stated that they felt their experience on placement had, overall, been generally positive. Despite this, there were some aspects of the experience that they found challenging. For four of the eight students in the Focus Group the most difficult part of the experience related to management and their lack of experience. For one student this meant learning how to manage people who did not get along with each other:

Sometimes when you work on a project, when you’re managing it and certain people don’t get along. Trying to realise that from an early stage – who doesn’t like to work with who. …

(Male, Engineer, Age 22-25, FG)

For others it meant learning how to deal with challenges to their authority or status:

When I worked with the engineers they respected me. But the operators! Well they were even older than the engineers. And I’m not joking, they’d be difficult. I had to train them and they’d say “Who are you?” … Really difficult.

(Male, Engineer, Age 22-25, FG)

Taking into consideration the students’ various perspectives and experiences, it is not unreasonable to argue that, in terms of ‘learning’, negative experiences are at least as important as positive ones. Indeed, negative experience not only shape and influence subsequent decisions, but take students out of their nature comfort zone and into the ‘real’ world of work!

Conclusions and Recommendations
This study has brought together research conducted with two very different groups of students, those studying social science and / or business and those studying engineering. As a consequence of this it is possible to identify a number of key issues and challenges common across disciplines.
Whilst two different methodological tools were used to gather data, the inductive nature of this part of the study has enabled the researchers to draw together a number of recommendations based upon the study findings. These recommendations, which have been divided into four categories, are given below:

**Recommendations for HEI Managers**

i. **Promote Placements Positively.**
   - There is a clear need to ‘sell’ the benefits of placements to both prospective and current students.
   - Work to promote the concept of placements to employers.

ii. **Capture Student Learning**
   - The depth of student learning in terms of both ‘soft’ and ‘vocational’ skills development, when taken in the context of the experiences students gain on placement means that there is much to capture.

**Recommendations for Academic Colleagues**

i. **Embed ‘Employability’ into the Curriculum**
   - Colleagues should consider how best to embed employability into the curriculum
   - Introduce ‘real-life’ experiential learning and teaching approaches into lectures.

ii. **Actively Participate in the Quality Management of Placements**
   - There need to be mechanisms in place by which the quality of the vocational and academic learning is measured.

**Recommendations for Careers Services and Placement Offices**

i. **Manage Students’ Expectations**
   - There is a clear need to manage student expectations right from the onset.

ii. **Market Placements Positively**
   - Careers Services need to promote the benefits of placements to students and academics.
Recommendations for Students

i. Make full use of Careers / Placement Services
   o Many students did not make full use of the available Careers/Placement Services. University Careers Services have much to offer students seeking placements. Within an increasingly competitive market it is worth taking the time and effort to find and what is available – and to make the most of everything that is offered.

ii. Apply for a Placement Early
   o Several of the students who did not take a placement indicated that the reason for not doing so was that they failed to find one. This reiterates the importance of applying for placement early-on in the academic year.

Recommendations for Employers

i. Work in Partnership with Universities
   o Universities want to work with employers! In working together with university careers services as well as with individual academics, employers can help identify suitable placement opportunities for students that will be of benefit not only to the students – but also to the employer’s organisation

ii. Provide Work-Place Mentors
   o Experienced line-managers and mentors can act to stretch individual students and in doing so promote their learning.

The qualitative research findings outlined in this report have begun to show the value of placements in terms of student learning and development. In developing the above, the researchers have taken into account the study findings and have sought to develop practical and realistic recommendations which will meet the needs of the various stakeholders.

In conclusion, this research reinforces the findings of previous studies in that it has shown that formal work-based placements provide a unique learning opportunity – one that potentially can change a student’s life and future. Moreover, it is the ‘developmental’ aspects of the placement that are the most valuable for students; mainly in terms of personal growth, but also in relation to the augmentation of technical and vocational skills.
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What is Work Based Learning? A critical examination of the literature surrounding the concept of Work Based Learning

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Key Words
Work Based Learning, Negotiated Work Based Learning; Academic Framework

Abstract
As a new researcher examining the barriers preventing negotiated work based learning being embedded into mainstream Higher Education (HE), I have become increasingly aware that a key issue is the apparent confusion surrounding the term ‘work based learning’. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to examine the different practices which are labelled work based learning in order to produce a definition which encapsulates negotiated forms of based learning which clearly distinguishes them from other forms of work based learning. The aim of this ‘work-in-progress’ paper is therefore to review the relevant literature in order to gain an informed understanding of the different practices labelled work based learning as well as to explore why there appears to be so much confusion surrounding this commonly used term.

The importance of providing a definition that is generally understood and accepted cannot be underestimated. Whilst many within the wider educational, economic and political community perceive work based learning to be a common feature of HE, those working and researching in the field of negotiated work based learning claim only a limited number of examples of this form of work based learning exist, and where it does, it is typically situated on the periphery of university activities. In addition, proponents of negotiated work based learning assert that many of their counterparts working in mainstream HE have a very narrow perspective of work based learning which has resulted in some strong resistance to more negotiated forms of work based learning becoming part of the mainstream provision.

This paper draws on the work of contemporary researchers and practitioners within the field of negotiated work based learning including Boud, Gibbs, Garnett and Costley as well as researchers from the wider HE community in an attempt to analyse why perceptions differ from one another and how this has contributed to the confusion which surrounds work based learning. In addition, it will also investigate why there appears to be a general resistance within HE to embed negotiated work based learning into the mainstream HE curricula. The paper concludes by drawing together and evaluating themes which are identified as being fundamental in understanding this seemingly enigmatic term.
Introduction

There is little disagreement within HE and the wider economic and political community that work based learning is extremely valuable (Brodie & Irving, 2007), evidenced by successive UK governments over the last twenty years urging HE to foster stronger links with the workplace (FDF, 2007; Garnett & Workman, 2009; Hodkinson, 2005b; Johnson & Tilley, 1999; Leitch, 2006; Wildridge, Childs, Cawthra, & Madge, 2004).

However, whilst most universities claim to have incorporated work based learning into their core provision at both undergraduate and post-graduate level (Brodie & Irving, 2007), those working and researching within the field of negotiated work based learning claim only a limited number of examples exist (Major, Meakin, & Perrin, 2011), and these are typically situated on the periphery of universities’ activities (Lester & Costley, 2010).

The reason for this apparent paradox may be attributed to the fact that a wide range of academic practices exist within HE which are perceived as being examples of work based learning. The different practices of work based learning appear to fall along a spectrum which at one end involves modules that are designed and delivered within a clearly specified discipline framework, through to the other end where programmes are negotiated with the learner and their employer. At the farthest end of this spectrum, these experiential programmes are not delivered by the accrediting university but by an HE partner or the employer themselves.

According to Major (2002a) resistance towards negotiated forms of work based learning stems from the rather narrow belief (which has pervaded the UK HE sector for over a century) which assumes HE learning occurs within and across discipline frameworks. The problem is further compounded by the fact that many within mainstream HE have a limited view of what actually constitutes work based learning (Lester & Costley, 2010; Wedgwood, 2008). This, Nottingham (2012) claims, has resulted in several academics being strongly resistant to negotiated work based learning becoming embedded into the mainstream provision. In addition to claims that such programmes are instrumentalist and economically driven in nature, critics also warn that as they deviate away from the traditional model of teaching and learning they undermine the fundamental philosophies and values that underpin HE (Wedgwood, 2008).

However, as HE finds itself under increasing financial pressure due to massive changes in funding arrangements, the growth in free on-line resources through massive open online courses (MOOCs), not to mention the predicted fall in 18-22 year olds entering HE, universities can no longer rely on full-time UG curricula as their sole or even main income stream (Gustavs & Clegg, 2005; KSA Partnership, 2008). HE managers and academics now need to critically review their offerings in order to attract new markets (Boud, 2012; Friedman, 2013); therefore more than ever before there
is an important role for HE to support workplace learning and development through initiatives such as negotiated work based learning (Lester & Costley, 2010).

**Definitions of Work Based Learning**

One of the earliest accepted definitions is set down by Boud, Solomon and Symes who describe work based learning in its broadest sense as ‘*a class of programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces*’ (Boud, Solomon, & Symes, 2001, p. 4). They assert that work based learning manifests itself in a variety of forms falling along a continuum ranging from courses that are merely conventional HE programmes tweaked to meet certain criteria agreed with a work organisation and which are typically delivered at the workplace; through to programmes which depart totally from any traditional disciplinary framework of university study and which involve new modes and assessments of learning because they involve negotiation with the learner and their employer. The wide range and breadth of programmes and delivery modes which can be labelled as work based learning is also evidenced in Major’s definition: “*any planned programme of accredited learning in a higher education context. This may include the experience of work based learning for an undergraduate in full time study as well as the experience of work based learning for a full-time employee on a part-time programme of study who is following a planned programme of learning through work.*” (Major, 2002a, p. 2). However, whilst both Boud and Major allude to the fact that work based learning can exist in a range of guises Garnett and Workman assert that to be classified as **negotiated** work based learning, programmes must be “*grounded in the context, nature and imperatives of work*” (Garnett & Workman, 2009, p. 3). This critical distinction that **negotiated** work based learning requires work and the workplace to form the purpose and context is also reiterated by other proponents including Lester and Costley whose definition states that negotiated work based learning is ‘*all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns*’ (Lester & Costley, 2010, 562). However, despite this, there continues to be confusion surrounding negotiated work based learning and how it differs from other forms of work based learning. As a result, the term is used to describe a vast range of activities that vary widely in terms of both their context and purpose (Boud, et al., 2001; Garnett, 2007; Nikolou-Walker & Garnett, 2004; Nixon, Smith, Stafford, & Camm, 2006; Nottingham, 2012).

**Factors which may be inhibiting more negotiated forms of Work Based Learning becoming embedded into mainstream HE?**

The concept of work as a place of learning is not new, indeed it can be traced back to the middle ages with examples of practice based learning and placements being embedded in several
professional fields of study including Engineering, Health and Education (Costley, 2007; Garnett & Workman, 2009). However, Major (2005) and Boud and Solomon (2001) argue that compared with much of the rest of HE curricula, negotiated work based learning programmes have actually only been in existence for around thirty years, therefore this form of work based learning is a relatively new entrant to the world of HE.

The rationale often cited for the inclusion of any form of work based learning within the HE curricula is its use as a mechanism to enable universities to respond to the on-going UK government pressure for universities to develop partnerships with local and national business, and provide programmes that are more relevant to the needs and requirements of the workplace (Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh, & Petrov, 2009; Leitch, 2005; Talbot, 2013b; Wedgwood, 2008; Wilson, 2012). However, Major (2005) argues taking such a functionalist and pragmatic perspective underestimates the value of the more negotiated forms of work based learning as it effectively reduces their contribution to HE to purely economic terms, so overlooks their contribution to HE learning from an ontological perspective.

Chisholm, Harris, Northwood and Johrendt (2009) concur, claiming that much of the analysis surrounding negotiated work based learning is, at best, superficial and simplistic. Both Chisholm et al. (2009) and Major (2005) claim research exploring its philosophical and educational nature now urgently needs to be undertaken if the true worth of negotiated work based learning within HE is to be revealed. Without an argument being put forward as to its educational and ontological merits, negotiated work based learning will continue to be vulnerable to scholarly scepticism and cynicism regarding its contribution to the HE curricula, and its academic rigour (Major, 2005).

Major (2005) drives forward the importance of ‘relationality’ as a core philosophical construct for negotiated work based learning. Whilst learning within a university setting is traditionally individualist in nature (Major, 2005), a growing body of research now recognises that much of our learning is socially driven and relational in context (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000; Bloomer, Hodkinson, & Billett, 2004; Hodkinson, 2005a; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2000). The subsequent interest in socially oriented modes of learning has resulted in more participatory and relational methods of teaching and learning now being accepted within HE (Hodkinson, 2005b) and as such, awareness has grown of the importance of contextualisation in facilitating effective learning and development which is a key characteristic of negotiated work based learning (Boud & Hager, 2011).

Drawing on this, Major (2005) reasons that negotiated work based learning allows a more holistic way of knowing which embraces action as well as thought and most crucially a way of ‘being’. He goes on to claim that placing the theory before application may not necessarily be that appropriate for learning and development; instead he argues the theory should be derived from reflection on
practice in order to elicit principles. This is supported by Gibbs (2009) who puts forward the argument that unlike negotiated forms of work based learning which are highly relational and contextual in nature, mainstream HE may actually impede deeper levels of learning because of its emphasis on generalisations within the confines of specific disciplines.

Whilst no commonly recognised philosophy to underpin negotiated work based learning exists yet, Major et. al (2011) confirm that much of the theory exploring this field draws heavily upon experiential learning, with consideration of adult learning at a more general level. As such, Major (2002a) argues that its experiential and relational nature provides a valid justification from a philosophical and educational perspective for negotiated work based learning to have a place within HE.

**Why the confusion?**

The confusion which has prevented a generally accepted philosophy from emerging is also due, at least in part, to the fact that the literature examining work based learning appears to fall into two distinct domains (Nottingham, 2012).

The first involves examples of work based learning which follow a conventional delivery mode and are discipline led. This appears to match most universities’ definition of ‘work based learning’, as they are often describing vocational training in the form of sandwich and work placements which are typically discipline led and which require very little amendment to the core systems and structures of mainstream HE (Portwood, 2001; Workman, 2010). Workman (2010) and Lester and Costley (2010) claim in this context work based learning is delivered within a subject discipline and is generally geared towards 18-22 year olds attaining specific skills and knowledge in order to enable them to enter the workplace on graduation. As such, the way it is delivered fits with the embedded philosophies and culture of HE, so offers little risk to the traditional educational philosophy which underlies most HE learning.

The second involves examples of work based learning which are more innovative and progressive in nature as (to varying degrees) the programmes are negotiated with the learner and designed around their needs and expectations in partnership with their work organisation (Boud, et al., 2001). The subsequent mode of learning occurs in the workplace rather than the classroom, and is relational and experiential in nature (Costley, 2007). For most researchers and practitioners of these negotiated forms of work based learning (Gibbs, 2009; Major, et al., 2011; Workman, 2010) the target audience is not full-time undergraduate or post-graduate students, but people in the middle of their careers, who are employed and who are looking to their workplace to situate, contextualise and accredit their development and learning. The content of the learning experience is defined by
the nature of their working roles, not by the restrictions of the pedagogies of a specific discipline (KSA Partnership, 2008).

Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons (2003) originally coined the term ‘Mode 2’ to distinguish learning within the workplace from the more empirical, science based enquiry which they termed ‘Mode 1’. Whilst such a distinction can be useful in emphasising that learning occurs in various forms or modes, their assertion that these are two distinct epistemologies has received criticisms for being too tenuous (Gulbrandsen & Langfeldt, 2004; Hessels & van Lente, 2008). In addition, Major (2002a) cautions against becoming too embroiled in a debate which focuses on whether two distinct modes of learning and knowledge exist, as such distinctions could lead to prejudicial arguments which elevate one mode over the other and, perhaps even more worryingly, that it may lead to assertions that their distinctiveness means they cannot be mixed. He urges researchers to recognise that negotiated work based learning consists of a mix of both modes of knowledge and that the ‘mingling of theory, knowledge application, and knowledge generation through the discrete activities associated with learning through work is what typifies work based learning” (Major, 2002a, p. 9).

Unlike the majority of the mainstream HE curricula which is framed by rules set down according to specific disciplines, negotiated work based learning makes ‘work’ the context of the learning process, therefore work is in effect the subject discipline (Garnett & Workman, 2009). The learning taking place is in the form of knowledge and understanding required to be effective in particular work roles and contexts; the resulting HE curriculum is therefore driven by the work demands (KSA Partnership, 2008). As such, negotiated work based learning programmes are significantly different from any other within the university curricula (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Therefore, Workman (2010) argues that negotiated work based learning is more than just a ‘mode of study’, rather it becomes a ‘field of study’ which should be awarded the same academic credibility as other academic disciplines.

This raises issues regarding how this form of work based learning should be delivered and assessed. Whilst the QAA (2007) has attempted to provide some guidance in regards to assessment standards, these are fairly vague and are better suited towards programmes which contain placements, rather than negotiated work based learning programmes. In addition because there is no nationally agreed framework regarding how such programmes should be developed (Chisholm, et al., 2009), most negotiated work based learning initiatives have been championed and organised at a local level which has led to a rather piecemeal approach across the sector. The lack of any nationally agreed framework Chisholm et al (2009) claim only adds to the confusion surrounding what is meant by negotiated work based learning. They argue that in order to address this confusion and facilitate the process of negotiated work based learning being accepted as part of the core HE provision, it is crucial that those responsible for UK educational policy collaborate so that a commonly agreed
approach to accrediting and assessing this form of learning can be produced. Major et al. (2011) concur with this sentiment, claiming that in order to be accepted within the wider HE community, those who are promoting negotiated work based learning must show that it has a sound epistemological base!

**Why are academics reticent in becoming involved in Negotiated Work Based Learning?**

Finally, despite the apparent interest in developing and supporting work based learning within HE both Costley and Dikerdem (2012) and Major et al. (2011) claim the number of academics capable of facilitating negotiated work based learning remains limited. The lack of expertise within the academic community may be partially linked to how negotiated work based learning is perceived within the HE management hierarchy, and where it is subsequently situated within the university infrastructure (Lester & Costley, 2010). Lester and Costley (2010) claim that the positioning of negotiated work based learning: on the periphery, subsumed into another faculty or discipline, or within the university’s mainstream activities, is critical to the kudos associated with it by the mainstream HE community. The problem regarding how negotiated work based learning can be embedded into the core HE curricula is further exacerbated by the fact that, despite their interest in developing greater links between HE and the workplace, successive governments’ policies with regard to HE funding has elevated the importance of traditional empirically based research. This in turn has resulted in most UK universities becoming more centrally managed and their underlying educational philosophies and cultures being moulded into a more homogenised form where traditional frameworks and modes of teaching and learning are emphasised (Filippakou, Salter, & Tapper, 2012). As such, there appear to be few incentives for academics and managers to explore more innovative philosophies and pedagogies of learning.

The contrasting perspectives on what constitutes work based learning, either as a mode of learning which is subsumed into another discipline, or as a field of learning in its own right, has influenced the way universities have embedded negotiated work based learning into their activities (Nottingham, 2012). In the former learning follows a conventional transmission model of discipline related knowledge from tutor to student, whilst in the latter learning is both reflective and trans-disciplinary in nature, and where the academic acts as a facilitator rather than a provider of knowledge (Boud & Solomon, 2001). Here academic knowledge is not perceived as superior to knowledge generated within the workplace (Sangster, Maclaran, & Marshall, 2000).

However, because of its contextual nature much of academia remains sceptical regarding the merits of trans-disciplinary learning, with claims it clouds the fact that there is little substantive academic knowledge being created (Costley & Dikerdem, 2012). The lack of academic support in validating trans-disciplinary learning is further compounded when considered in light of Gibbs’ (2009) assertion
that combining class-based learning with learning within the workplace can be seen as being problematic.

As such, Portwood (2001) argues that if negotiated work based learning is to have any chance of being embedded at an institutional level, it must receive the full support of senior management and academics, and ideally be situated within the university’s mainstream infrastructure rather than within a specific discipline led department or faculty. He argues that if this is achieved, universities can expect to experience several strategic and operational benefits including research; staff development and administration; however the greatest of these will be the capability to develop programmes that can be customised to meet the needs and requirements of learners and their employers (Portwood, 2001). As such, Workman (2010) emphasises the need for high level champions who are prepared to push for negotiated work based learning to be included within university policies including the institutional plan.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the preceding discussion that work based learning is an over-arching term that can be used to describe a variety of programmes and modes of learning which range from simple placements to HE accredited programmes which are centred around and negotiated with the student. As such, it is impossible to produce a single definition which covers all instances except at the most generic level. However, it is also evident that whilst there are various forms of work based learning, the majority can be classified according to two separate categories.

The first, which is the most common form of work based learning, occurs within a specific programme of study where the learning outcomes are determined by a particular discipline. The learning undertaken takes the form of conventional transmission of discipline related knowledge and the tutor decides on the content, delivery and assessment. Its purpose is to prepare learners for the workplace, so the core target group are those in full-time education.

The second, which advocates of negotiated work based learning including Boud, Major and Costley claim is more innovative because it is trans-disciplinary and relational in nature, uses a framework which enables programmes to be negotiated around the needs and requirements of learners and their employers. This form of work based learning, which I have referred to throughout this paper as **negotiated** work based learning, is aimed at those already in employment and their employers. The content of the subsequent programmes which are developed is contextually driven around the learning opportunities identified within the workplace and as such are not restricted to the confines of any specific academic discipline; as such this form of work based learning is often referred to as being trans-disciplinary in nature. The social and relational nature of negotiated work based learning is what distinguishes it from other forms of HE learning. It is this form of work based learning...
learning which is student centred and negotiated which my research will focus upon. As such, I have defined negotiated work based learning as ‘learning that is undertaken within the workplace by those who are employed by an organisation, and where the learning outcomes are negotiated and agreed between the student the academic institution and possibly the employer’.

However, whilst it is important to produce a definition which is understood, consideration also needs to be given to ensure that negotiated work based learning is viewed as a credible form of HE learning. When justifying its inclusion within the HE curricula, proponents of negotiated work based learning should not focus solely on its usefulness as a vehicle to generate revenue, but should also critically examine how it contributes to HE from an ontological and epistemological perspective. As such, researchers and practitioners of negotiated work based learning must clarify what philosophies and concepts underpin this form of work based learning in order to present a valid and rigorous argument to the wider HE community of its educational value. In addition, in order to enable negotiated work based learning to be embedded into the mainstream HE curricula, those responsible for HE policy making and funding must collaborate in order to create a nationally recognised framework which incorporates a commonly agreed approach to assessment and accreditation. Otherwise, without being able to clearly illustrate that negotiated work based learning has a sound epistemological basis which enables some consistency in terms of how programmes are developed and assessed, proponents of negotiated work based learning will continue to meet with resistance across the wider academic community.

References


The Evolution of Critical Thinking Tools for Students on Work Placement

Katharine Hoskyn, Independent Consultant, Diana Ayling, Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand and Sally Rae, AUT University, New Zealand

Abstract
This paper investigates student perceptions of a structured approach for the development of critical thinking skills in a placement, known in New Zealand as Cooperative Education (Co-op) or Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), at the end of a Bachelor’s degree and considers how social media could enhance the development of these skills.

Reflection and critical thinking are commonly used in programs to ensure that students gain the maximum benefit from their placement experience and achieve the learning outcomes for the course. Claxton and Hoskyn (2007) discussed an approach for developing critical thinking skills in a distance course for students on placement. From literature they identified key elements that are important in engaging students in critical thinking activities. This approach was later adapted for a face-to-face workshop for students. The workshop utilized a classification of models of critical thinking and reflection by Hoskyn and Slater (2008). During the workshop students were guided along a continuum of activities from straightforward exercises to more complex tasks. They were given a range of models from the classification of Hoskyn and Slater and encouraged to select a model for critical thinking exercises or to develop their own model. The workshop students also reflected on and identified their own thinking process.

Over a number of semesters, an evaluation of the workshop was undertaken by students using a self-completion questionnaire, with a number of open-ended questions. Results were evaluated using content analysis. The initial response from the students at the beginning of the workshop was one of slight negativity about past experiences of critical thinking at the university. However once students had expressed these views they were quickly ‘drawn into’ the activities in the workshop.

From the results of the students’ evaluation of the workshop and subsequent discussions with the students it became apparent that they found the structured session very useful, insightful and liberating. Students enjoyed the challenge of mapping their own critical thinking. Many had never previously considered their own thinking processes. The students were able to get an insight into how they critically think and how other students think in various situations. The growth in confidence of the students as a result of the workshop made it invaluable. The main concern of students was the need for earlier introduction of these concepts at university and more frequent follow-up and discussion as their courses progressed.
This paper discusses the results of the evaluation, including limitations of the study, and concludes with some suggested improvements to the workshop activities. More importantly consideration is given as to how these tools can be developed using social media and the benefit of using social media tools in conjunction with such a workshop. Academics may find it helpful to consider the classification of critical thinking models in relation to their programs. The paper and workshop may contain ideas that can be utilized by others in the development of critical thinking. The student feedback gives insight into how students view this as a developmental skill, which can be helpful in developing workshops and sessions to assist students.

**Background**

Reflection and critical thinking skills are commonly used in programs of study to ensure students gain the maximum benefit from their work integrated learning placement experience and achieve the learning outcomes for their course of study. The definition of critical thinking has been hotly debated. The definition used by the authors is that developed by a panel of experts in 1990. The panel described critical thinking as:

> Purposeful, self-regulatory judgement which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations upon which that judgement is based (Facione, 1990, p.10)

Hoskyn and Slater (2008) identified a number of processes and models that fit into the broad definition given above. These are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1. Types of critical thinking models**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of models</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Typical components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research/evidence based</td>
<td>Chaffee (1991)</td>
<td>Based on scientific process of hypothesis, research or testing, analysis of results, conclusions. Consideration is given to statistics, validity and reliability, inferences, causal assumptions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Chaffee (1991)</td>
<td>Solution-oriented or decision-oriented models often based on John Dewey’s model (1910) and include components such as: Problem recognition and definition Search for alternatives/possible solutions Consider the pros and cons and use criteria for making a decision based on available information and goals Identify solution Implement Review effectiveness/reflect on results The key consideration is the outcome of the process – whether a solution was found.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ennis (1987)</td>
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Claxton and Hoskyn (2007) discussed an approach for developing critical thinking skills in a distance course for students on placement. They identified key elements important in engaging students in critical thinking activities. The key conditions for fostering critical thinking in the model developed by Ennis (1987) are: clarity (focus, analysis and asking questions); basis (observation and information from other people and judging credibility); inference (deducing, making generalizations and making value judgments) and interaction (communication with other people). Brookfield (2005) identified that observation and recognizing/challenging one’s own thought processes are key factors in the development of critical thinking.

“The importance of interaction and discussion among learners in promoting critical thinking skills” has long been emphasized by theorists and was used in a study investigating the quality of student’s critical thinking by McLean (2005, p. 6). Claxton and Hoskyn (2007) examined how the interactive conditions can be met through distance learning using a learning management system or online

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reflection about Practice or fieldwork</th>
<th>Boud (2001)</th>
<th>Incident analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schon (1983)</td>
<td>Often a cyclical 4-step process such as:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bogo and Vayda’s ITP Loop (1998)</td>
<td>Gather information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kolb’s experiential learning model (Kolb, Rubin, &amp; McIntyre, 1984)</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kemmis and McTaggart’s Action Research Spiral (cited in Grainger &amp; Taylor, 2004)</td>
<td>Link to theory or knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Response (Bogo &amp; Vayda, 1998) or Concrete experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation and reflection</td>
<td>Formation of abstract concepts &amp; generalizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Test implications of the above in new situations (Kolb et al, 1984)</td>
<td>Consideration is given to context and reference to theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of argument/understanding issues</td>
<td>Identify, analyse, define, judge credibility, make inferences, judge solution or Interpret, analyse, infer, explain, evaluate (Chaffee,1991)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative/idea generation</td>
<td>Elements or principles of critical thinking sometimes with no specific order or process</td>
<td>“A combination of knowledge and imagination” (Simpson &amp; Courtney, 2002, p94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A lived activity” (Brookfield, 1987, p14)</td>
<td>Brookfield (1995)</td>
<td>Generally less process-oriented and more focused on components, skills, capabilities and dispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ennis (1987)</td>
<td>Mainly focus on higher order thinking from Bloom’s Taxonomy (Analysis, synthesis and evaluation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schon (1983)</td>
<td>Phases of thinking rather than steps e.g. phases of trigger, appraisal, exploration, develop alternatives, integration. (Brookfield, 1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lipman (cited in Moseley, Baumfeld, Elliott, Gregson, Higgins, Miller, &amp; Newton, 1991)</td>
<td>Consideration is given to recognising and challenging assumptions, recognition of different perspectives, exploring alternatives, importance of recognizing role of emotion, the person-specific nature of processes</td>
</tr>
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</table>
course. They identified that it was important to develop interaction between students early on in a course. This referred to a habit of students posting and replying (rather than student post and staff reply). There was a need for guidelines for discussions in early stages. However students may simply replicate the processes of their supervisors and so there is also the need for some less directive activity.

Since then the concept of community of practice has become widespread. A placement or practice-based learning course is a community of practice (Ayling, 2010). Moving to an online community of practice should bring together people who share and generate knowledge into a mutually supportive environment (Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001). The unique aspect of the community is the way in which the members use the technology, and particularly how they engage with social networking services such as Facebook (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). This interaction replaces the online learning management system used by Claxton and Hoskyn. It offers the same opportunity for interaction by students and staff to support learning communities.

Students and staff share concerns about the use of Facebook (Ayling & Hebblethwaite, 2001). As Hewit and Forte (2006) explain, students must balance the potential social gain with the relinquishing of some control over the presentation of self. Students mainly use Facebook to keep in touch with people they already know. In an academic sense, they use it to share lecture notes, ideas and to be informed of academic activity (Bosch, 2009). Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) report Facebook was used to keep in contact with friends from high school rather than make new connections in fields of study or profession.

Using Facebook to support work placements is a relatively new use of a familiar tool for many participants. Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) report that students spend approximately 40 minutes per day on Facebook. Facebook is likely to compete with other communication tools including email, intranets and websites. Lewis and West (2009) have identified that students view Facebook as fun and not part of serious study or professional networking. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) have found that students are beginning to acknowledge that Facebook could be used for learning purposes. This behaviour tended to be initiated by the students themselves rather than teachers. However, Ophus and Abbitt (2009) report that 85 percent of students have never used Facebook to communicate with an instructor. Selwyn (2009) reports that only 4 percent of postings relate to academic use. It is, however, likely that students will be more open to social networking services for course administration than academic staff and hosts.
More recently, research by Isacsson and Gretzel (2011) has demonstrated positive use of Facebook in support of collaborative learning projects. Facebook illustrates the potential of social media in creating engaging learning environments. The study situates the theoretical discussion of the value of ‘edutainment’ and the promise of social media to foster self-directed and social learning. The findings provide theoretical implications for the conceptualisation of social media use in education and practical implications for educators who would like to integrate social media in their teaching. Facebook provides the opportunity for engagement and collaboration in a wider learning community. Interestingly, research indicates students are no more likely to engage in Facebook than they are with any other online learning tool (DeSchryer, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009).

Context
This research studied critical thinking development in the context of work placement towards or at the end of a three or four year bachelor’s degree. An online programme developed by Claxton and Hoskyn was adapted to provide a face-to-face workshop, delivered approximately three-four weeks into the placement. During the workshop students were guided along a continuum of activities from straightforward exercises to more complex tasks. Straightforward tasks included brainstorming words associated with critical thinking. These were then used as a basis for discussion before students were shown a range of models and asked to develop their own. Students selected a model and applied it to a topical news issue, before then applying the model to a more complex issue from their own discipline. The range of models came from the classification of Hoskyn and Slater (2008). The workshop students also reflected on and identified their own thinking process.

Methods
The researchers in this study implemented an interpretive approach to their research data. An understanding of the subjective meaning of the critical thinking was sought by the research team (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Noting that qualitative research draws heavily on interpretation – interpretation by the participants, by the researchers and then by the readers of the reported research (Stake, 2010), in this case a conference paper, the research is concerned with the way students perceive a workshop designed to enhance their critical thinking skills. The students’ perspective of the critical thinking workshop was obtained through semi-structured, self-completion questionnaires completed by students after the critical thinking workshop. Data was collected from three semesters of study as the number of students taking the paper was small. Twenty-three students completed the questionnaire out of a total of 30 students. A self-completion questionnaire was used in order to provide students with confidentiality and to ensure that their participation was voluntary. Students were given an information sheet prior to the
workshop that explained the research and that participation was voluntary. The questionnaires were administered (handed out, collected and collated) by a lecturer from another faculty. This person had no contact with the students during their studies. If a student did not wish to complete the questionnaire, they returned it uncompleted. The lecturer also typed the responses from the questionnaires and undertook the preliminary analysis.

Open-ended questions were asked in order to enable students to express their opinion in their own words. All of the questions in the questionnaire were open-ended. The disadvantage of using the self-completion approach was that it was not possible to probe or gain clarification on any responses that were not clear or lacking in depth. However most of the responses were generally clear.

The questionnaires were also completed immediately after the critical thinking workshop and so an initial reaction to the workshop was obtained. Responses may have altered if students had more time to consider the material covered.

The lecturers considered that by the end of the workshops goodwill had been generated. The questionnaires were completed whilst this atmosphere of good will may still have been present. This may have influenced some of the responses to be more positive than if undertaken when removed from the environment of good will.

Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The qualitative interviews were analysed using content analysis. With a small number of interviews, this was done using manual coding. The six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) were used: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; reviewing the data for themes; checking the themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Coder checks were undertaken to ensure consistency of coding. The full questions text can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Questions

1. What part of the workshop did you find the most helpful and why?
2. What part of the workshop did you find the least helpful and why?
3. In what ways could the workshop be improved?
4. In the workshop, you were asked for form your own model. Was this helpful and if so, in what way?
5. As a result of the workshop, how do you feel about the use of critical thinking in assignments, at work or for any other aspect of your Co-op/placement – more confident, less confident, no change? And why is this?
Findings

The initial response from some students at the beginning of two of the workshops was one of slight negativity about past experiences of critical thinking experiences and reflection at the university. They expressed annoyance that they had been expected to undertake some form of critical thinking with insufficient preparation; or they had found past activity difficult or boring. Alternatively they were sometimes unhappy that they had received preparation that steered towards a particular way of thinking. This was sometimes a thought process that they did not feel was natural to them. However once students had expressed these views they were quickly ‘drawn into’ the activities in the workshop. Very few of these negative comments were expressed in the semi-structured interviews:

The explanation of critical reflection is what & is required. I was in the dark about it before I found it a chore. but now I feel it can be a constructive and positive learning tool for me.

(Participant)

Students were asked about what they had found most helpful in the workshop. It was hoped that students would identify the sections or activities in the workshop that they found most helpful. However when asked about the part of the workshop that they found helpful two answers prevailed: appreciation about discussion in groups and the range of models.

The benefits of group discussion were particularly prevalent after one of the workshops, after which almost every student mentioned this as a positive feature. Students felt that the group atmosphere enhanced critical thinking and level of interest in some way. The lecturers also felt that the discussion in that workshop had gone particularly well. Examples of student comments were:

Working in groups because we were able to interact and bounce ideas off each other so the session was not boring. (Participant)

Group discussions – relaxed atmosphere – produces discussion – creates more critical thinking. (Participant)

Hearing ideas and opinions from many other people. Because it broadened my horizon. (Participant)

The range of models was appreciated, particularly as it enabled students to have the freedom to use a model that suited them.

Good breadth of info. It was good to look at different models for critical thinking and be told that the outline we get given for assignment isn’t the only way or necessarily the best way. (Participant)

Two questions were combined for analysis: What was the least helpful? and, How could the workshop be improved? These questions were analysed together and as the answers tended to be repetitive. Whereas the majority of students made two or three positive comments, they generally
only made one comment about what could be more helpful. There was a great deal of individuality in the responses with very little consistency.

The responses ranged from having too much information at the workshop - “information overload”; the workshop being a little too long (comments only made about the first of the workshops); and that the workshop should have been held much earlier in their bachelors course rather than in the 3rd or 4th year. A few students gave a specific activity that they did not find so helpful; however there was no consistency in the activities named. Each student named a different activity.

Students were asked how helpful it was that they had been asked to develop their own critical thinking model. Some identified that this was positive as they got to know themselves and their thought process better. In some cases this could be used to identify gaps in critical thinking skills:

- Very helpful, it stimulated the thinking process. Helped me to understand myself better. (Participant)
- Yes. Good to i.d. my thinking process. (Participant)
- Yes, good to see what you already know with what you need to know. (Participant)
- Yes – shows how much I knew about critical thinking. And how I could develop it. (Participant)

Some students liked being able to link their thought process to an existing model or process or to modify an existing process:

- Yes, but analysing (another) model after was more helpful as it showed me how to adjust it for different situations and identified what was missing. (Participant)
- Yes we were asked and I suppose this was helpful, however perhaps more so if it was linked to one (or 2 if necessary) models. (Participant)

For others the recognition that people are different and think differently was an important acknowledgement that arose in that process:

- Yes – it showed that the different people at the group all think differently and that they all should be respected as different way to skin a buffalo. (Participant)

The instinctive side of critical thinking emerged in some comments:

- I didn’t really form a model, I just went with what came into my head – it was helpful to discuss what I wrote and hear others’ perspectives. (Participant)

The majority of students felt that either their confidence had increased or they would look at critical thinking differently in the future. Some felt that there would be no change in their skills as they were already skilled in this area.

- I already felt that critical thinking is useful in assignments but also more important in personal and work life, now I think I shall focus on developing scope / broaden my thinking. (Participant)
I feel more confident, it reminded me of ways to analyse situations and showed me new ways to enjoy the process and improve my critiquing. (Participant)

More positive, same confidence but have got some really useful tips that will help me enjoy it more. (Participant)

Discussion and conclusions

Students’ overall perceptions of the interactive workshop to develop critical thinking skills were positive. However, the research with the students was undertaken immediately after the workshop. In spite of considerable effort to ensure that the questionnaires were administered by a neutral person, the positive environment of the workshop may have primed students to respond more positively than if questioned at a later time. Because student perceptions were collected confidentially, it was not possible to look at their perceptions in comparison with grades or assessment of critical thinking. This study is purely about student perceptions of the workshop.

Students emphasized how much they had gained from the discussion and the group activity for the development of critical thinking skills. This is similar to the sense of community mentioned in previous literature. Claxton and Hoskyn (2007) developed that sense of community several years ago through an online course. Today this sense of community is more naturally developed through social media communities. In fact several aspects of Claxton and Hoskyn’s approach could now be presented through social networking – a forum that students will naturally engage with. Rather than having to make a special effort to login to an online course, the activity can be undertaken when students are engaging with social media in their daily lives. Whilst literature from a few years ago showed that students did not see social media as an academic activity, more recently this seems to be changing. The social networking environment creates a more natural conversational environment than Claxton and Hoskyn were working with. It is also more likely that students will engage with each other more readily than waiting for a response from a lecturer.

Giving the students a range of models or processes seems to have been more liberating for students as they did not feel constrained to using one process. It also seemed to make them more ready to adapt the model or process to different situations.

This study showed that there were improvements that could be made to the workshop – in terms of reducing its length or removing one of the activities. However there was no consensus as to which activity could be left out. A modular approach to the workshop could be taken so that students took part in the activities of their choosing. This is hard to do in a face-to-face setting when limited numbers of students are taking a course. A modular approach can be presented through social media. A relatively small number of students can still take part in a discussion group and hold an effective conversation.
Interaction through online communities seems to be driven more by students than lecturers. This is a further advantage of social media over learning management systems, in which lecturers sometimes had to work hard to ensure that dialogue between students occurred rather than students asking questions and waiting for lecturers to answer.

An online environment (similar to the learning management system) has a further advantage of more frequent and convenient discussion between students. With work place learning, bringing students together can be difficult with the geographic location of placements being widespread. Online discussion can happen throughout the placement rather than just once as with the face-to-face workshop researched in this study. This makes the discussion and critical thinking a more integral part of the placement semester.

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Embedding Employability in Higher Education
Oliver Jackling, Queen Mary University of London

Background

The Employability agenda is gaining increasing prominence in the UK Higher Education sector, driven both by increasingly vocal demands from business for better prepared graduates, and the requirements of students who are driven by higher fees and a more difficult graduate employment market when leaving university. The result is an increasing drive among Higher Education institutions to improve their ‘employability’ offerings to their students via a number of initiatives. The importance of this policy for businesses is clear – the highest priority for UK businesses relating to Higher Education is for institutions to develop the employability of their students and improve the business relevance of their courses, both being rated as more than twice as important than any of their other priorities for Higher Education (see below).

![Business Priorities for Higher Education](image)

CBI Education and Skills Survey

Improving Graduate Employability

The views of companies surrounding how Universities can best improve employability are key to addressing how Higher Education can address concerns surrounding the work-readiness of graduates. In Queen Mary’s own survey of graduate employers undertaken as part of this research, a number of options were given as to how Higher Education could best address concerns over employability. Of the options offered, employers rated increasing and improving work placements as the most beneficial, along with the call for Universities to involve companies in adapting degree courses to better reflect their needs, with these two options being notably higher than other approaches (see below).

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1Learning to Grow – Education and Skills Survey – Confederation of British Industry (June 2012)
QMUL Survey of Graduate Employers, 2012

This suggests that engaging companies in degree content is highly valuable in improving employability among graduates and should be a high priority for Universities looking to improve the employability of their graduates, enabling the development of employment related skills to be embedded within the curriculum as a whole.

In response to these views, a series of focus groups involving representatives from graduate employers alongside both academic and careers service staff from QMUL were held to discuss the ‘skills gap’ of graduates entering the UK workforce and ways to improve the development of employability skills, utilising the expertise of graduate employers to help develop effective measures to address relevant skills development at university. The meetings have been promoted via a number of sources including the London Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Association of Graduate Recruiters and Careers Service contacts from within the university. Once participants had been identified they were sent a summary of the background and issues surrounding the development of Employability within Higher Education and a number of discussion points to consider before the meetings.

**Focus Group Discussion**

**Employability – Key Issues for Employers**

While a degree is seen as an essential attribute when recruiting, the recruitment process often focusses on experience and skills developed outside the degree rather than in the degree itself, which is reflected in the high importance given to work experience or other non-academic activities undertaken by the student either at or outside university. Some students seem to demonstrate a
belief that a high quality degree (1st, 2:1) from a high profile university – particularly those with highest academic reputations such as Oxbridge – should be sufficient to demonstrate their suitability for a graduate role, but the recruitment process is more likely to focus on their skills and experiences developed alongside the degree or outside university altogether. The area most identified as a weakness in graduate applicants was their lack of commercial awareness. This is supported by skills surveys such as the CBI² who identify ‘Commercial Awareness’ as the greatest weakness of graduates aside from foreign languages.

Graduates ability to articulate the skills they have and providing examples, particularly in an interview context, is also a key weakness, and could reflect a lack of focus on reflection on their own development over the course of degree programmes. A lack of basic interview skills is also seen as a concern - candidates that are best able to articulate their skills and give examples of where they have been developed are seen as the strongest by employers. The confidence of graduate applicants in their abilities was noted as a key factor here – high quality applicants demonstrated both confidence in presenting, group assignments, and assessment tasks aimed at evaluating ‘soft’ skills, as well as confidence in and ability to articulate their own abilities and relate them to their experience either within University or externally. Applicants that demonstrate a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the work of the company, and have researched the company fully prior to the application process, stand out among their peers, many of whom make little effort to show an interest in the company and develop background knowledge about their activities. It would also be useful for students to be encouraged to research companies before open days and similar events so they are aware of the full range of roles within a company and the variety of activities they do.

A lack of awareness among students of potential career paths, both in general and within specific companies, is another problem for many graduates entering the employment market. Many graduates are unaware of the wide variety of roles within some organisations, preventing them from taking an interest in organisations they do not feel offer a job suited to their interests and abilities, when in fact there are suitable roles available. This is mirrored in the focus among many students on larger high-profile organisations to the detriment of SMEs, despite the number of graduate roles available at smaller organisations.

Many students do not take proper advantage of Careers Service support and opportunities – Universities need to highlight the importance of personal development outside of the academic element of the degree. The fact that for employers other parts of the University experience are seen

²Changing the Pace- Education and Skills Survey – CBI (June 2013)
as just as important as the academic element when it comes to job applications after graduation is often not fully appreciated by students. There is a need to challenge the view that is taken by many students that a degree is three years period before entering the ‘real world’ of employment and highlight that students have to take their personal development seriously. The introduction of higher fees may help to prompt students to view their time at University as an opportunity to properly develop the skills required in the workplace, taking fuller advantage of the opportunities offered and taking greater personal responsibility for managing their own personal development. At the moment many graduates expect to be ‘spoon fed’ – more effort could be made to ensure they view it as their own responsibility to identify opportunities to develop their skills for later employment.

One approach to highlighting the importance of the non-academic elements of University could be to assign students an academic and careers/personal development tutor from the start of their degree. A second tutor whose responsibility was to provide help with other elements of the students development could encourage them to take advantage of careers opportunities, identify and address areas of weakness in their CV/skills. While academic tutors can and often do offer advice covering such areas, they are often not best placed to provide this advice (academic backgrounds as opposed to commercial background for example) whereas careers departments are better placed to offer their expertise concerning jobs and employability. Using academic lectures and seminars to highlight careers events and opportunities would be valuable, as would a closer alignment between the academic elements of the degree and careers service activities – something that has been recommended for Higher Education from as far back as the Dearing Report in 1997\(^3\). While many universities have made considerable progress in integrating careers services and events with academic departments, this remains the exception rather than the rule – a ‘silo’ approach is seen as contributing to student’s lack of take-up of careers events and services, whereas a more integrated approach leads to higher levels of participation and engagement with the various opportunities offered by careers services to develop employability.

The potential for university practices to help develop professional behaviours such as attendance, professional language, and punctuality was highlighted as another area where more could be done. One example given was the lack of serious punishments for non-attendance at lectures or tutorials, or punctuality. By not ensuring there are proper punishments or reprimands for habitual lateness or non-attendance, this serves poorly to prepare students for later employment where such issues are seen far more seriously. Research from employer’s organisations has long argued that personal

\(^3\) Higher Education in the Learning Society – National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997)
attributes such as a positive and professional attitude\textsuperscript{4}, reliability and a good work ethic\textsuperscript{5} are among the most important considerations for business when assessing potential applicants, suggesting that encouraging these sorts of behaviours at University can help boost graduates later employability.

The value of mentoring was highlighted, ensuring students are more aware of potential career progression, have greater confidence in and awareness of commercial areas and their ability to perform a professional role, and are far more ‘polished’ in interviews and during assessment processes. Avenues such as alumni, companies with links to careers services and so on are a potential source of mentors for engaged students. Alumni in particular are a highly valuable resource for such sorts of schemes as they are usually more prepared to get involved than professionals without a previous connection to the university, and provide professional expertise as well as experience of the university course that can enable them to provide advice on potential avenues and opportunities within the university itself that can help develop employability. In addition, with a sufficiently large number of alumni signed up, mentors can be assigned who work in industries that match the career aspirations of students involved in the scheme. Past research has highlighted the benefits of mentoring schemes, and the significant benefits they can have for educational and career outcomes among those involved, particularly when effectively run.\textsuperscript{6}

Networking is seen by employers as a key skill, and mentoring from professionals in relevant businesses and proper engagement with open days and company run events arranged under the Careers umbrella were noted as highly useful at developing this skill among students.

**Key Suggestions**

- Addressing lack of awareness about the requirements of the application process – both a lack of confidence in articulating skills, as well as expectation that a good quality degree is enough to guarantee success
- Universities should aim to help build awareness of the range of opportunities both within larger organisations, as well as smaller companies that are often overlooked by students
- The importance of engaging with careers services and their importance as part of the university ‘offering’ should be highlighted alongside the academic part of the course,

\textsuperscript{4}Future Fit – Preparing Graduates for the world of work- CBI (2009)
\textsuperscript{5}Institute of Directors Graduate Skills Briefing – IoD (2007)
\textsuperscript{6}Mentoring and Young People – A literature Review – J. Hall, SCRE (March 2003)
perhaps by closer integration of the careers department with the academic course — careers services are best suited to develop many aspects of the skills students need

- While academic tutors often provide advice covering employability, the most relevant expertise is generally concentrated within the careers department — a ‘careers tutor’ assigned to a student alongside their academic tutor could help address this

- University courses can do more to help prompt professional behaviours such as attendance and punctuality — the lack of consequences for persistent lateness or non-attendance was highlighted, in sharp contrast to a professional context

- Mentoring schemes can be highly valuable for students, both informing them about what particular careers involve as well as identifying routes into them and helping prepare for the application process — in particular alumni are a valuable resource for Universities looking to run such schemes

**Curriculum Development - Teaching**

In general, involving a wide range of learning activities and techniques was noted as the best way to help foster the range of skills that contribute towards employability. The benefits of group work, ‘peer learning’, public facing presentations and discussions, were noted as potential areas that can help develop student’s skills. In particular a wider range of activities can have a significant impact on student’s confidence — experience of more ‘real world’ situations (such as working in groups of public-facing presentation) has a strong impact on how well they perform in similar situations that they are likely to encounter as part of their application process for graduate roles, or as part of their working life. Rapid feedback and prompting students to engage in constructive self-criticism also contribute strongly to the benefits of these sorts of approach. However, the argument can be made that the Higher Education sector has made considerable progress in addressing this issue in recent years, yet without it having (as yet) impacted on the views of many employers. With the increasing prominence of the employability agenda, many universities (particularly the post-1992 Universities) have devoted considerable effort and resources to developing their courses to better address the employability concerns, working with employers, careers services and other partners to adapt the way their degrees are taught. The increasing recognition some universities are receiving for these initiatives from employers organisations, including annual awards (e.g. the AGR Graduate Development Awards) and reports highlighting best practice from organisations such as the CBI suggests that the value of such initiatives will become more noticeable to graduate employers, with likely knock-on effects on employment prospects for graduates from universities whose employability initiatives have been highlighted by awards and press coverage.

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7 *Working towards your future – CBI/NUS (March 2011)*
Academic staff often do not fully engage with the Employability agenda – giving them greater ownership of how the agenda is taken forward could help prevent the implementation becoming merely a ‘tick box’ exercise and ensure that proper thought is given to how academic courses teach transferrable skills useful for work. The approach taken in schools was highlighted as one way to go about this – while at a strategic level the implementation is standardised across all subjects, the way in which skills are developed and fit into the wider curriculum is determined at a subject level, allowing teachers to have greater ownership and engagement of the policy. In addition, teaching staff are given training covering the nature of the skills to be developed and examples of how to integrate skills development within the curriculum, ensuring that differing interpretations of the skills required does not become a problem.

Problem Based Learning methods – a student-centred approach in which students collaboratively solve problems and reflect on their experiences – was noted as an example of best practice in developing the wider variety of skills that contribute towards employability, such as teamwork, problem solving, public speaking and self-motivation. By involving a wide variety of techniques such as self-directed learning strategies, team participation, and self-evaluation of learning activities, this technique shares greater similarity with workplace activities than more traditional teaching methods. PBL has long been used in medical education and has had documented success, and has seen increasing growth among professional education courses such as law and social work. Research into the impact of PBL on students attainment supports the view that it has a significant positive impact on the skills of students and is generally seen as helping to support the development of skills valuable for the workplace such as problem solving, self-development and teamwork.

The key importance of developing student confidence in a range of different scenarios is a vital part of developing employability. While this can to an extent be difficult within the academic curriculum, key elements such as practice and rapid feedback on positive and negative elements of a student’s performance were noted as areas where it can be addressed. This necessitates a wider range of situations being developed as part of degree courses – Queen May’s current initiative where students are expected to teach language classes is one such example where students gain experience of public presentation that can help develop confidence and experience of situations they would not normally face as part of a degree.

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The potential for Universities to be more active at promoting best practice was noted – an example given was that awards could be given to tutors/lecturers who are most successful at using various innovative methods of teaching and assessment and they should be encouraged to share their approach with other staff to help encourage the spread of a wider variety of teaching and assessment methods. This could also be combined with greater use of peer review among academic staff, further prompting staff reflection on different teaching methods. This could help contribute to the use of a wider range of teaching methods that helps contribute to students developing a wider variety of skills.

Ensuring students have a written record of what they have done and the skill they have developed – e.g. learning log on YA work placements - is noted as important. This helps students identify where and how they have developed skills, which is highly useful in helping them articulate their skills and experience in interviews, and give examples of where they have developed or used a skill. The HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report), proposed by the Burgess report in 2007,\(^{10}\) could help fulfil a similar function for degrees more generally, giving a detailed breakdown of what students have studied, what activities they have been engaged in, and provide a reminder to graduates as well as a useful tool for potential employers. However, a potential problem is how the HEAR report will cover non-accredited activities – while non-accredited activities can be included, this may well only cover activity undertaken within the University (e.g. student societies, university awards) rather than worthwhile activity undertaken outside the University itself which may be seen by employers as of greater importance.

Offering modules that focus on more ‘professionally focussed’ elements of the subject are potentially highly valuable for student. While some subjects (for example engineering, law, or accounting) naturally cover professionally valuable elements of the degree subject, this can also be adapted to other subjects. For languages, for example, modules covering professional translating, language for business, or languages and computing would provide the opportunity to develop valuable professional skills while still developing student’s knowledge in their core subject.

Involving commercial elements into approaches to teaching has many potential advantages for students, for example getting students to undertake commercial projects that involve working with a business. Such initiatives can still be assessed by a written piece of academic work, while still enabling students to gain useful experience working in a different context, tailoring their presentation for different audiences rather than purely academic essay writing, as well as enabling

\(^{10}\) Beyond the Honours Degree Classification - R. Burgess et al (November 2007)
the University to develop links and networks with companies. One example given from within Queen Mary involved Spanish language students writing an essay on multiculturalism in the east end of London, with the best examples to be published in both Spanish and English by a Spanish publisher, alongside an audiobook with the students reading their own essays. This helps give students experience of tailoring work to different audiences (rather than writing for an academic audience) and experience working for an external business.

**Key Suggestions**

- A wide variety of teaching methods is best placed to develop the attributes that contribute towards ‘employability’ – e.g. group work, public presentations, peer learning
- A detailed record of modules, activities, and skills development has the potential to be very useful for students, with initiatives such as detailed learning logs helping students articulate the skills they have learned and give examples
- Modules covering professional elements of the core subject would be highly valuable – for languages this could cover professional translation, languages and computers, or languages for professional careers (e.g. law, engineering)
- Working in a non-academic context can give students valuable experience of writing for different audiences or engaging with employers alongside their academic development
- Experience of work-related situations is key to developing the confidence that is vital for graduates entering the workplace – this can be integrated into learning within university courses

**Curriculum Development – Assessment**

The difference between academic assessment (traditionally via exams or essays) and professional assessment methods hardly helps prepare students for employment and the application process for jobs. A wider variety of assessment methods would be far more effective at developing workplace skills and preparing students for working life. The model of employers assessment centres, which involve differing sorts of approaches to evaluate a student’s competencies and transferrable skills (rather than ‘hard skills’ such as literacy and numeracy, which are largely taken as something guaranteed by a student’s degree) can have lessons for University assessment. Assessment Centres use a wide variety of methods in order to assess and develop student’s skills, regularly including elements such as group work, self-assessment exercises, oral presentations, and workplace situations (for example teaching careers expecting applicants to teach a sample class and be assessed on their performance). In general the focus on writing essays for an academic audience is
less suited to developing the sorts of skills required in work, and adopting assessment methods that more closely match professional evaluations or workplace tasks, along with considering how both subject knowledge and transferrable skills can be assessed together, has the potential to vastly improve students development of skills and behaviours useful for working life. Prioritising assessment methods is one of the most likely ways to influence the behaviour of students, due to the importance placed on the assessed elements of a course.

The value of peer assessment is one potential avenue for developing assessment techniques that are valuable for developing transferrable skills relevant to the work place. Not only does peer assessment help develop the ability to provide constructive feedback – highly useful in the workplace – but it also can help develop students ability to provide nuanced self-assessment, often noted as a weakness of graduates by employers. While peer assessment can raise issues regarding students giving their peers higher marks than they actually deserve, there are ways to approach this that address the issue. One suggestion would be to divide a student’s mark for a ‘peer assessed’ piece of work so that 50% of the mark was the results of the assessment by their peers, and the other 50% was given for their own assessments of other students – how accurate and fair their marks were felt to be by academic staff, and how effectively they backed up their conclusions. This sort of assignment can help develop a culture of offering and receiving constructive feedback on work, a very valuable trait in a professional context. The value of peer assessment is supported by past research which argues that it contributes to improved learning outcomes and helps to develop skills relevant to the workplace.

The value of providing feedback and reflection as part of the marking process was given as one area where academic assessment could mirror professional assessment more closely. In particular, self-assessment and self-evaluation are highly effective at helping students develop, identify and articulate skills. Self-assessment regularly forms part of professional evaluations, and including similar elements in University assessments can help develop students’ skills in these sorts of exercises. Self-assessment elements during the application process, and after starting a graduate role, regularly prove particularly difficult for students, and by including similar elements in assessment at University this weakness can be addressed. In addition, this helps ensure students are better placed to articulate their skills during the application process for graduate roles. Q&A sessions and immediate feedback were highlighted as very useful at helping to ensure the skills addressed in assessments or tasks are best developed, enabling a student to see the reasons they did well or

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poorly and learn the lessons for the future. Another benefit of this approach is that it helps to foster greater confidence in applicants surrounding their ability to perform a certain task, which is often lacking in a commercial context rather than a purely academic one. The importance of explicitly explaining the objectives/competencies intended to be displayed for individual assignments can be very helpful – by explaining precisely what assessment is looking for and giving immediate feedback as to where individuals have performed well or poorly such methods can have an immediate impact on skills and approach.

Collaborative work and group assessment have particular benefits in terms of developing transferrable skills as well as more closely mirroring workplace situations, thus developing student’s confidence (particularly surrounding teamwork and presentational skills) surrounding ‘real world’ situations. ‘Teamworking’ is one of the most commonly identified employability skills, and clearly group work is the most effective way to develop and provide experience in this area, while group discussions and presentations also contribute towards the development of presentation skills and confidence. Research suggests that collaborative work is seen by students as the most effective way of developing transferrable skills relevant to the workplace. In general higher education should work to include more group work, group discussions and teamwork exercises, with individuals assessed within the group to ensure that every student’s contribution is taken into account – the fact that individuals are to be assessed rather than the group as a whole should also be made clear to students involved. While group exercises can raise concerns surrounding assessment as to what extent less able students can take advantage of others to shield their own relative weakness, experience shows that these can be alleviated by a ‘prepare together, present separately’ arrangement. Even when weaker students are given easier aspects of the group work to present, their individual understanding can be effectively determined by having a Q&A immediately afterwards where they are expected to demonstrate their understanding of the work underpinning the assignment.

Involving employers in assessment to a greater or lesser degree can have a hugely positive impact in developing transferrable skills among students. It can help give them experience of using the ‘academic’ skills developed in their degree in situations that have a more visible relevance to working life; give them more experience of the differing culture and language of business (for example a greater focus on presentation than the purely content-focussed view that is seen as more suited to academic situations); and provide experience applying research assignments to real world

13 Developing generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment - Crebert; Bates; Bell; Patrick; Cagnolini (2004)
contexts (which has proven to have been a significant benefit for students in courses such as Economics). Company involvement in these sorts of arrangements can be presented as beneficial to both sides - companies involved get to have a first look at potential applicants and publicise their business, while students get experience of the sort of ‘authentic assessment’ highlighted by the HEA and develop their workplace skills as part of their course. Building links with local businesses to enable students to prepare assessed work for a professional context rather than an academic one could be highly useful in developing useful skills and experience – one potential approach would be to offer translation services to local businesses with translations done by students then assessed by staff. This would both help the university and the students to build links with local businesses, but would also ensure students have experience preparing work for a commercial context and receiving feedback from employers, while still enabling their work to be marked by academic staff to ensure that the University maintains responsibility for the students assessment and avoid potential issues with external assessment.

Key Suggestions

- As with teaching, a wider variety of assessment methods helps to ensure that students develop employability related skills – in particular relating assessment tasks to ‘real world’ situations i.e. outside an academic context
- Peer Assessment can be highly valuable at developing the skills and behaviours that are useful in a workplace context, and help develop the ability to receive and provide constructive feedback that is highly valuable in the workplace
- Self-assessment is often a weakness for graduates – including more elements of self-assessment as part of University courses can help address this issue and contribute to their ability to develop and articulate transferrable skills
- Collaborative work is highly effective at developing the sorts of skills required in a workplace context, and requiring students to present group work individually and following up with a detailed Q&A ensures students can still be individually assessed
- Rapid and detailed feedback helps ensure assessment develops both skills as well as self confidence in performing tasks
- Involving employers in assessment can be very beneficial, particularly in contributing to student confidence in their ability to perform in the workplace – involvement can be highly

14 A Marked Improvement – Higher Education Authority (Oct 2012)
beneficial for employers, raising the profile of the organisation and getting a first look at potential applicants

**Employability Modules and Awards**

The wide variety of approaches taken by Universities towards the Employability agenda and the development of ‘transferable skills’ or ‘graduate attributes’ means there are many examples of separate modules, sessions or teaching programmes aimed at developing professional skills. Examples given included ‘workshop weeks’, compulsory ‘skills sessions’, or compulsory or voluntary modules covering the development of transferrable or workplace skills. Most successful examples of this sort of approach to developing employability and “transferrable skills’ are those that are more closely integrated into the course as a whole, following up on the areas covered later on in the course and providing the opportunity for students to properly reflect on what they have learned and how it is relevant, as well as identifying their strengths and weaknesses, helping to prompt them to identify areas for improvement and take a more proactive approach to their personal development.

Involving employers in the development, delivery or assessment of modules is perhaps the best way to ensure they are effective and highly regarded by students, along with presenting them as a core and compulsory part of the degree to prevent them being seen as a less important ‘add on’ to the academic element of a degree. Experience suggests students are far more likely to view employability-focused modules or courses favourably if there is a high level of involvement from employers. Queen Mary’s own version of this sort of programme, the Drapers Skills award, was identified as an area that could be given greater prominence both to students and outside the university.

There are a range of examples of Universities having success with these sorts of initiatives - Sheffield Careers service was cited as one example of good practice in this area, with the ‘undergrad of the year’ award for a range of subjects, with winning students gaining a work placement with companies affiliated with the scheme. Exeter University has been highlighted by the Association of Graduate Recruiters as ‘best overall provision for graduates’ in 2012, largely based on separate modules and awards, with the ‘Exeter Award’ which certifies a student’s involvement in employability training and extra-curricular activities; and the ‘eXfactor’ course, a two day course focused on developing employability skills and helping with future career planning.
Key Suggestions

- Modules and awards covering employability and transferrable skills are most effective when there is an element of follow up and reflection on what has been learned, particularly if this follow up is done as part of the core academic course.
- Involving employers in the delivery or assessment of these sorts of initiatives is highly recommended, and helps ensure that they are well placed to develop the targeted skills as well as helping ensure they are viewed positively by students.
- Employability or ‘skills development’ modules or awards can have a definite impact if they are effectively organised and presented, in particular engaging employers in aspects of their delivery.
- Such initiatives benefit from being highlighted as a key part of a degree, or having a certain level of involvement as compulsory for students.

Work Placements and Sandwich Years

One problem identified was the lack of effort across much of Higher Education to prioritise workplace learning, given its importance to contributing towards both graduates future ability in the workplace but also their future success applying for jobs. In particular, a compulsory element of work experience as part of the degree (as is done on some courses) would be a great benefit to students. Initiatives such as the (recently abandoned) compulsory work experience element for all Year 10 School pupils were highlighted – in contrast, while some degrees or universities have a compulsory placement as part of the course this is far from widespread across Higher Education as a whole. In fact, as highlighted by the Wilson Review\textsuperscript{15}, the proportion of courses with a sandwich year or year in industry is actually decreasing. This contrasts with the increased importance placed on work placements by graduate employers – as noted by an annual survey of the highest profile graduate employers\textsuperscript{16}, in many areas high profile employers will not consider employing someone who has not undertaken work experience in a relevant professional environment, and in many cases refuse to employ applicants who have not completed an internship or other work experience within their own company. In addition, when graduates use academic examples of their use/development of transferrable skills when applying for jobs these are generally seen as weaker than examples from outside the academic context such as charity work, employment or work placements, further highlighting the importance of integrating workplace learning into University provision. This presents different challenges for different subjects however – while for many subjects that are explicitly

\textsuperscript{15}Review of Business–University Collaboration, T. Wilson (February 2012)
\textsuperscript{16}The Graduate Market in 2013 – High Fliers Research (2013)
vocational (law, engineering) it is relatively easy to integrate work placements into the degree, for other subjects this can be problematical due to the lack of direct business relevance of the course. The University of Surrey was highlighted as an example of good practice in this area, with over 65% of Undergraduates undertaking a year-long placement as a compulsory part of their course.

It was noted that candidates often do not properly articulate the skills and experience they have obtained through work experience, either a work placement done as part of a degree or jobs undertaken outside of their degree programme. The value of reflection on what has been learned both during and after a placement or sandwich year is highly valuable at ensuring the development of skills and making sure that students get the full benefit of the experience.\(^{17}\) In addition, many felt that students often look down upon jobs which are seen as ‘low level’ (retail or bar work, for example) as not providing relevant skills when applying for graduate level positions and thus do not get the full benefit of this experience when applying for graduate roles - despite the fact that such roles provide valuable experience covering customer facing roles, building confidence, customer awareness and other attributes which are relevant to graduate level roles as well. Students are often not effective at highlighting the skills they developed and the experience they gained over the course of work placements or work undertaken outside of University. The importance of highlighting skills development helps support the view highlighted in other research that reflection on skills and personal development, and specific identification of the transferable skills targeted and developed, is one of the most significant factors in developing employability both on work placements and as part of the Higher Education experience as a whole.\(^{18}\) This ties in with initiatives being trialled in some of Queen Mary’s Year Abroad work placements - students undertaking a ‘key skills’ self-assessment both before and after their year abroad focussing on transferrable skills relevant to employment, and trialling assessment by their employer based on their performance across a number of workplace skills used within their role identified by the student with their manager when the placement starts. In particular, academic follow-up can help ensure students take reflection seriously, such as the use of an assignment after students return from a placement or sandwich year asking them to make an oral or written presentation discussing what they have learned from their experience. This could be a potential area for development – the use of an assignment after students return from the Year Abroad asking them to make an oral presentation discussing what they have learned from their experience is already being considered and would help address this issue. Prioritising student’s reflection on a placement ensures they are properly prepared to


\(^{18}\) *Learning to Work* – Scottish Funding Council (2004)
articulate what skills they have learned rather than merely describing their experience, which is far more valuable when it comes to applying for graduate roles.

The lack of focus on SMEs among students was also noted as a potential area to be developed – evidence suggests the majority of graduates start off their working life after universities working for SMEs, yet the focus both for students and careers departments is towards larger organisations. However, opportunities among SMEs need to be approached differently to larger organisations, which will have well established internships/work placements which are advertised on their websites and to Careers services. In order to secure these sorts of placements there is a need to build relationships between careers services/ departments and SMEs as part of a network so that companies can get in touch with a university as a ‘trusted provider’ when they feel there are opportunities to take on a student. In contrast larger organisations will have long-running placement schemes which will be publicised via their website, other online sources, and often via university links as well. In these situations students benefit from negotiating their way through application processes that are largely similar to standard job applications, thus providing them with valuable experience for graduate job applications on completing university.

SMEs often give students more responsibility and more valuable experience during a placement than larger organisations, and a better opportunity to develop skills. However, students tend to prefer to target placements at ‘big name’ organisations where they may well be given less valuable roles and benefit less from the experience, due to the feeling that this will look more impressive on their CV to prospective employers. It was felt that more could be done to highlight the potential benefits of smaller companies for work placements, covering the potential benefits of working in a smaller team and being given more workplace responsibility.

Key Suggestions

- Higher Education should do more to address the lack of work placement opportunities integrated into courses given their increasing importance to both students and employers when it comes to finding work and assessing applicants
- More should be done to ensure reflection on work placements and sandwich years is integrated into degree courses more generally, ensuring students get the full benefit of their experience
• Procedures that encourage students to consider and articulate the skills they use/develop on work placements (e.g. reflection on skills learned, employer assessment) can help them when applying for jobs

• SME placements require a different approach to larger organisations – building relationships between University staff and companies will be most effective at sourcing placements at smaller organisations

Next Steps
This research has been undertaken as part of a wide ranging review within the School of Languages, Linguistics and Film aimed at improving the development of employability among our graduates. The findings will help inform policy within the school and will be disseminated through the University as a whole to help contribute towards discussion around best practice at developing the sorts of skills and attributes sought by graduate employers.
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RP8

Relationships between Work Related Learning and Employability within different Communities of Higher Education Practice, with a focus on Nutrition Placements: Work in Progress

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Key words
Higher Education, Work-Related/Based Learning, Student placements, Employability, Communities of Practice, Nutrition

Abstract
Enhancement of employability and emphasis on student placements and employer engagement are all high on the economic and political agenda for Higher Education [HE] (BIS, 2011). This is evident in on-going developments, including the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR, 2012) and the Wilson Review (Wilson, 2012). Evidence suggesting work-based learning [WBL] enhances employability is currently focused on sandwich year placements and associated with positive outcomes. Conversely a lack of work experience has been identified as a major barrier to securing employment (DWP, 2012). The relationship between work-related learning [WRL] and employability is complex and recent research concludes students’ academic ability may influence uptake and outcomes of Sandwich Placements (Green, Foster, McAree, McCann, McCarthy, McWall & Pogue, 2012). A number of perceived barriers to such placements have been identified, which may adversely affect uptake, as suggested by slightly reduced engagement in 2009 reported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2011). The Higher Education Academy [HEA] has acknowledged that evidence of WRL enhancing employability requires further investigation and greater rigour (Hill, 2012; Tibby, 2012a). A lack of consistency in terminology with a potential for confusion is apparent and needs to be addressed.

This paper covers initial work in progress, aimed to investigate current interpretations and inter-relationships in HE of WRL, WBL and employability and thus inform Nutrition research specifically. It draws critically on present policy and existing models from different Communities of Practice [CoPs] (Wenger, 2006). The rationale is reinforced by reflection on practice, relevant current developments and interest from the professional body for Nutrition. It supports generic needs for improved

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understandings and employability measurement along with potential benefits for students, stakeholders, HE policy and practice. The topic is directly relevant to ASET (2013) and has implications for HEAR (2012) and the HE social revolution.

Current findings support the rationale and reveal a lack of evidence in Nutrition and the need for greater awareness and engagement. In conclusion the terminology ambiguities need to be addressed more universally and although WR/BL normally influences employability positively, future research requires improved methodologies. Finally for Nutrition, professional body and employer engagement are essential.

**Introduction and Background**

WRL and employability terminology and their possible inter-relationships, have inherent social aspects linked with the accelerating pace of change, which is interconnected with present policy, practice and the HE social revolution. The roots of this many faceted revolution lie in the introduction of the world-wide web in 1991 (McPherson, 2010), the expansion of UK Universities in 1992 (Further & Higher Education Act, 1992) and considerable increases in student numbers and diversity, following the Dearing Report (1997). Further factors are the political strategy from 1998 for 50% participation in HE (DfEE, 2000), supported by Widening Participation [WP], increasing HE access and diversity (HEFCE, 2004; Jones, n.d., c.2008); the Bologna Process, bringing Eurocentric expansion of postgraduate provision with increased mobility of HE students and staff, (Fell & Haines, 2009) and the constantly rising number of international students residing in the EU and UK (EMN, 2012). Another influence is widespread frequent engagement in social media and networking.

Social changes taking place in HE have demographic, socio-economic, social interaction/networking, social mobility and political elements, which have significant impact on HE culture and its outcomes, with implications for WRL, achievement and ‘employability’. Change is occurring at generic and sub-cultural levels (including CoPs) and from various perspectives, (e.g. local to global). As HE policy supports internationalisation within and beyond the curriculum (BIS, 2011), a wide range of factors make relevant contributions (e.g. international recruitment, exchanges, volunteering, overseas placements, and other interactive collaborations, distance e-learning and social networks etc.). These generally have social elements and connections with/from WRL and employability. Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, current HE developments supporting these perspectives are summarised in Table 1 (overleaf).

The revolution has brought many routine benefits that were previously unimaginable, but changed social contact, making much of it virtual or electronic. This could be adverse for traditional social
interaction and networking, including social skills so relevant to WRL and employability. A more diverse HE social mix brings many benefits, but also demands, including the need to keep pace with rapid technological development. The social revolution therefore presents various challenges, including how to harness it most effectively for WRL and employability.

It is intended that initial research forming the basis of this paper, will lead to investigation of WRL and employability in accredited nutrition courses, with a focus on undergraduate placements as a CoP. This has generic HE relevance, by debating terminology and exploring possible relationships between WR/BL and employability in contrasting CoPs and considering the implications. Data available from the Association for Nutrition [AfN] (AfN, 2013b) as the professional body responsible for nutrition course accreditation (AfN, 2013a), individual registration (AfN, 2012a) and professional conduct (AfN, 2012b) has also been investigated.

Table 1. WRL, Employability & the Social Revolution: Recent HE Developments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy / Reference</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
<th>Critical Issues &amp; Key Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIS (2011)</td>
<td>WBL, employability, enterprise, entrepreneurship, IT skills.</td>
<td>Translation into practice &amp; value of: recognition &amp; promotion of relevant aspects (with digital learning &amp; social networking opportunities). Reflected in Graduate attributes at local level (e.g. Leeds Met., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unistats, (2013a &amp; b)</td>
<td>Review of HE funding and Tuition fees.</td>
<td>Cost of &amp; influences on: increased HE ‘marketisation’ (Brown &amp; Carasso, 2013); stronger National Student Survey [NSS] &amp; ‘student voice’ influence on outcomes (e.g. employability), policy and practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Wilson Review (2012) | |

University of Greenwich, Greenwich Campus, 3rd – 5th September 2013
Top priority (Tibby, 2012a) to enhance employer & student engagement, hence improve social networks, WRL opportunities and employability. |
|---|---|---|
| National Centre for Universities & Business [NCUB] (2013) | Mission to nurture top talent, innovation, expertise and core partners | Measurement & evaluation of:  
Business opportunities, as above**: |
Section 4 – range of skills including ‘key’ (transferable) and professional (possibly CoP related with potential Professional Body tensions);  
Section 5.2 – professional status (e.g. accreditation & registration eligibility);  
Section 6.1 – ‘Additional Information’ (e.g. re: WRL, awards, volunteering, social engagement). Content/value, Review, Administration, Tracking etc. |

**Current Project**

**Methodology**

This paper is a scoping exercise conducted mainly through desk top research and reflection on personal practice (Schön, 1983; Moon, 2004).
It aims to examine concepts, understandings and inter-relationships between WRL and employability, thereby producing working definitions and identifying any inter-relationships, barriers, facilitators and/or other important outcomes which inform research, policy and practice. On-going objectives are to:

- address terminology issues,
- critically evaluate the current HE research base concerning inter-relationships between WRL and employability,
- identify any key barriers, facilitators and/or other outcomes
- apply findings to inform further Nutrition-focussed investigations and HE generically.

This will facilitate developing future nutrition-specific recommendations, but with broader potential for HE.

The following research questions [RQs] will be explored and subsequently support the future project specific to nutrition:

**RQ1.** How appropriate generically are the concepts and understandings of the terminology concerned with work related learning (WRL) and employability used in Higher Education, including those from various CoPs?

**RQ2.** What current evidence exists to support or refute a relationship between WRL and employability (or any other major outcome/s) in different CoPs of HE; what is the nature of the relationship?

**Communities of Practice [CoPs]**

Various academic disciplines (e.g. Nutrition) provide professional courses, usually supported by distinctive signature pedagogies [SPs] (Shulman, 2005) in conjunction with a professional body or equivalent, (e.g. A\&N, 2013a; General Medical Council, 2013). These characteristics often carry a certain amount of exclusivity and ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) to which WRL and employability could be contributors. A useful perspective is to view these disciplines as communities of practice [CoPs] (Wenger, 1998), where HE itself could be likened to an overarching CoP. The CoPs concept was originated by Wenger (1998) with Jean Lave, for a specific aspect of learning theory. Wenger, (2006) defines CoPs as: ‘as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ and identifies 3 essential characteristics of domain, community and practice.
The concept of CoPs is now widely adopted in HE, including for WRL. It has possible shortfalls and conflicts, but overall its use is supported here within these limitations.

Propositions:
1. There are currently no universally accepted HE definitions of WRL, WBL and employability, but working definitions can be constructed from exploration of the literature as a basis for a generic framework of reference to inform research, policy and practice for different CoPs.
2. Utilising working definitions, evidence from various CoPs shows WRL normally enhances employability but with certain barriers and facilitators and possibly additional outcome/s, including association/s with achievement.

Summary of Rationale:
Key considerations are briefly summarised below:
- The area of employability enhancement by WR/BL needs more research (Tibby, 2012a; Hill, 2012; Yorke & Knight 2006)
- An opportunity to contribute to research base and dissemination
- Relates to current HE policy and developments (BIS, 2011; Wilson, 2012; HEAR, 2012; HEFCE, 2013)
- Supports possible benefits for HE, Nutrition, other CoPs and stakeholders
- Potential for longer term, broader socio-economic benefits
- Possibility of enhanced employability and associated benefits and applications.
- Innovative research developing a focus on Nutrition.
- Timely for Nutrition due to founding of AfN in March 2010.
- AfN with strong professional development focus has expressed interest.

Ethics
Relevant research will comply with the AfN’s Code of Ethics and Statement of Professional Conduct (AfN, 2012c). Full ethical approval will be obtained before collecting data for primary research or any associated pilot

Critical Review of Key Aspects of Relevant Literature
Focussing on each of the two Research Questions in turn, linked to respective Propositions stated above, key aspects of the literature are reviewed below, starting with an introductory overview, followed by more detailed critical discussion:
1. WRL and employability terminology in HE

**Overview**

There is much literature in this field, but emphasis here is mainly on relatively recent work of UK relevance. Despite increased focus on WRL and employability in recent UK HE policy (BIS, 2011, Wilson, 2012; HEAR 2012 and HESA, 2013), inconsistent theoretical concepts persist with possible adverse implications for practical understandings (Connor & McFarlane, 2007; Tibby, 2012a; CBI/EDI, 2011). This is evident from personal reflection and widely recognised in practice and research, yet as Tibby reports (2012b) remains inadequately addressed in policy, requiring further investigation and action. The reason such definitions are commonly excluded from policy documents is largely unclear, but possibly for flexibility. However establishing a broadly accepted generic HE frame of reference could reduce misunderstandings and benefit practice. This has implications for nutrition where only very limited relevant information is currently available, so is of concern for the 40 or so mainly UK-based Nutrition courses identified as AfN accredited, of which about 25 are UG, (AfN, 2013a).

More broadly, from literature across HE, multiple perspectives on the key terminology are apparent and subject to chronological, theoretical, HE cultural and sub cultural influences). This is exemplified for employability by McQuaid & Lindsay (2005) and includes wider socio-economic, business, consumer and market influences. Similarly Hill (2012) discusses the contribution of HE policy (including social revolution factors) and Tibby, (2012a) that of variations in perceptions of different stakeholder groups. Despite the complexities involved, some core themes have emerged to inform synthesis of provisional generic working definitions. However it is apparent some flexibility may be beneficial when using terminology in specific contexts (e.g. for Nutrition).

**Critical Discussion**

a) Work Related Learning [WRL]

WRL and WBL are used broadly in UK HE literature and practice, but without universally accepted generic definitions. Superficially each may appear self-defining, referring respectively to any learning related to work (WRL) or any learning based in the workplace (WBL). However these interpretations overlook important nuances and alternative international nomenclature.

WRL is normally used in practice as an umbrella term. While Day (2010, p.3) in her HEA WRL publication for English as a CoP reports, WRL and WBL are often used interchangeably, Knight & Yorke (2006, p.103) distinguish between them and regard WBL as a component of WRL set in the work place, as supported here. They define WRL as: ‘a loose term covering activities that are
intended to contribute to a student’s fitness for employment’. Although this concisely covers intended learning, it is vague on transferable skills (see below) under the WRL heading.

Day (2010) regards as a generic WRL definition: ‘planned activities which use the context of work to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding which are useful in work, including learning through the experience of work and learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work’. However, despite being more comprehensive and incorporating WBL, that is not entirely explicit. It also resembles Gray’s (2001) WBL approach quoted below.

Day’s (2010) English discipline-specific WRL definition is: ‘Activities embedded in the curriculum that lead to the learning and transferability of the English knowledge, skills and generic competencies’. This is relevant, concise, broadly inclusive of the key aspects and implies a relationship with work (though not explicitly), through developing ‘transferable skills,’ (e.g. Careers New Zealand, 2013), which appear as ‘key skills’ in HEAR (2012). Although intended as English-specific, this definition is sufficiently generic to be applicable to other CoPs by replacing ‘English’ (e.g. with Nutrition) as the discipline. While this definition could be valid with or without placement learning, incorporating WBL explicitly would support present policy (e.g. BIS, 2011). Other concepts of WRL exist, but not as the preferred term globally.

In contrast Australian HE for example uses Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as the overarching term (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2009; Emslie, 2011). Comparing with WRL, ‘integrated’ suggests learning which is more embedded and intentional than if ‘related’, which is looser, so subtly different. However in practice, WIL and WRL are considered approximately equivalent, although some inconsistencies exist (Connor & MacFarlane, 2007). RMIT University (Melbourne) (2013) cites WIL as ‘an activity that integrates academic learning with its application in the workplace that combines theory with practice as part of an enrolled programme of study’. RMIT regards WIL as a top priority, contributing significantly to graduate work- and industry-readiness and fundamental to partnership building with external agencies. Their definition contains important points and is largely consistent with WRL.

Other useful examples of WIL come from Griffith University, Queensland, (2013), (including Billett’s (2010) Adult Learning practice perspectives, which he argues are ‘intended, enacted and experienced’). Alternatively, Trede (2012) with a background in clinical practice and HE, defines WIL as ‘the ideal environment for students to develop their own professional identity within a community of practice.’ She recommends a critical approach supporting students actively contributing to
advancing practice. Her interpretation is relevant for professional practice (with similarities to Nutrition). While it recognises Wenger’s (1998) notion of CoPs, it more closely resembles discipline-specific placements and the UK’s WBL, than WRL. This could weaken the argument that WIL and WRL are equivalent. However WIL is also used widely in Canada as generally equivalent to WRL, although interpretations vary (Sattler, 2011). Additionally Heerde & Murphin (2009) report its use globally to replace WRL is extending (e.g. in NZ, USA, SE Asia, and parts of EU), so may eventually affect the UK.

Therefore despite minor inconsistencies regarding transferable skills, these two terms will be regarded here as approximately equivalent. WRL will be used generically for all HE students’ learning associated with work provided it is transferable and applied where relevant to the course learning and subsequent graduate employment. WRL may therefore incorporate past or present, paid or unpaid, academic or non-academic work experience, including voluntary, casual or part-time work, associated with gaining relevant or transferable/key skills.

b) Work Based Learning [WBL]
Garnett (1997) in the UK defined WBL as ‘learning at HE level derived from undertaking paid or unpaid work.’ While simple and over-arching this definition overlaps with WRL, from which it should be distinct. Ambiguous terminology referred to by Nixon, Smith, Stafford & Camm, (2006) as ‘overcoming the language barrier’, needs addressing. Although Lewanski, Mewis & Overton (2011) in an HEA publication from the UK Physical Sciences Centre, (representing chemistry, physics, astronomy and forensic science CoPs), provide several alternative definitions and approaches to WBL, these tend to be slightly ambiguous or too restrictive. For example, Boud, Solomon & Symes (2001) writing in Australia, defined WBL as ‘a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in the workplace.’ Although relevant, this requires more clarity and specificity.

Gray (2001), from the UK, explained WBL is a means of delivery and ‘mechanism for learning’. He identified 3 types/aspects of WBL (see above) as ‘learning through, at, or for work’. The first 2 align with WBL, provided the work is formally discipline related, but otherwise could be WRL. However ‘for work’ could also be WRL, depending on where the learning takes place, so needs greater clarity and distinctiveness. Brennan & Little’s (1996) construction of WBL (UK) is ‘curriculum controlled by HEI, content designed with employer - learner, primarily full-time employee’. This is concise and largely appropriate. However depending on WBL structure, being full-time is not necessarily
obligatory and although tempered with ‘primarily’, could be misleading. Flexibility raised earlier could be applicable, but a generic broadly accepted working definition is still needed.

Consequently WBL will be used here (as in the author’s practice) to distinguish learning which occurs through a placement in a course-related workplace. This is likely to be discipline-related and probably discipline-specific, so practice-based.

The distinction is a fine one, since ideally perhaps all WBL should be practice-based, (although that could prove restrictive). However as inclusion of WBL in HE courses expands, placement provision models are diversifying, sometimes becoming more generic (e.g. inclusion of generic volunteering as a formal alternative or supplement to a directly course-related placement). Consequently any direct relationship of WBL with course discipline may become blurred if overlap with WRL increases. A generic example from practice is ‘The Newcastle Offer’ of real world experience as part of every student’s Degree’, (University of Newcastle, 2013). This is a generic Career Development module option, with a volunteering element, which does not need to be subject-related.

Lester & Costley, (2010) have written a critique of the value and practice of WBL in UK HE, claiming well-designed programmes of WBL to be robust and effective. However since WBL design quality varies, what is enacted and experienced may differ from what is intended, as considered by Billett (2012).

c) Employability

The term ‘employability,’ was introduced by William Beveridge, (later attributed with founding the Welfare State) in his 1909 book on unemployment. Although the term subsequently appeared in British Cabinet papers, it has only been commonly used in HE from around 1990. In 1999 Philpott described employability as ‘...a poorly understood buzzword, while Tibby (2012b) reporting on a recent HEA Employability Teaching and Learning Summit stated: ‘defining what is meant by employability remains as much of an issue today as it was 30 years ago’. Her other employability concerns included perceptions, measurement, barriers and engagement of students and employers (Tibby, 2012b). These relate to inconsistent terminology and extend to tutors, senior academic managers, and policy makers. As the HEA recognises employability issues, they have published a report on its pedagogy (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaacs & Lawton, 2012). Useful as this is, unless terminology issues are fully addressed and disseminated, further alignment will be required. The inconsistencies arise longitudinally and from different schools of thought, CoPs, and influences such as the HE social revolution.
Hillage & Pollard (1998) defined employability as ‘an individual’s ability to gain employment, maintain employment, move between roles within the same organisation, obtain new employment if required and ideally secure suitable and sufficiently fulfilling work’. While not HE specific, this gives a general view of individual employability and implicitly relates to social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), possibly gained through developing employability skills. Brynner & Parsons (2003) have written more specifically about personal ‘identity capital’ concerning employment and identified social, educational and psychological aspects. This indirectly supports McQuaid & Lindsay’s (2005: 209-10) paper on factors affecting employability and supports Gazier, (1998) who has described 7 chronological stages of its evolving interpretation.

While McQuaid, Green & Danson, (2005, p.191) noted that employability ‘remains a contested concept both in theory and in policy,’ they described two major uses, concerned with labour supply and demand, regarding both as useful. Since HE versions of employability are mostly based on skills and attributes, consequently they may overlook supply, demand and various key factors outlined by McQuaid & Lindsay (2005, p. 209-10). McGrath (2009) has specifically reviewed the meaning of employability for FE, but with resulting comprehensive HE relevance. Consequently, through the literature and reflection on practice, employability emerges as complex, multi-faceted and subject to change depending on time, circumstances and perspectives. This helps explain the challenge of determining a suitable generic definition in HE.

The intensified UK focus on HE employability due to political and economic factors identified above, is supported by funding policies for its enhancement (e.g. European Social Fund, 2013). While, a concise, comprehensive review of policy affecting employability is provided by Hill (2012), both the HEA (Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight 2006) and the Confederation of British Industry [CBI] have reviewed employability terminology (CBI/EDI, 2011; CBI/NUS, 2011). Employability data from the CBI/NUS 2011 survey, found 49% of 2614 students surveyed felt clear about graduate employability skills, (regarded by many employers as key to recruitment) and slightly less (45%) felt fairly confident about getting a job they wanted. Two thirds of students wanted more help and 70 % of employers reported university students should be more work-ready. Consequently the CBI has called for all universities to embed employability in their courses. In contrast some other sources (e.g. UKCES (2011) report conflicting results (Tibby, 2012a). Nevertheless the CIB/NUS data raises concerns. Since approaches to assessment varied between different surveys, this could cause misinterpretation in comparisons.
The CBI/NUS (2011) survey produced a broad definition of employability, complemented by an employability skills model reflecting survey findings with ‘positive attitude’ at the core, surrounded by ‘self-management, team working, problem solving, application of IT, communication, application of numeracy skills and business and customer awareness’. Their definition resembles Yorke’s (2006) (see below), with an underlying business tone, which requires clearer HE identity. Since a skills review was the main focus of the Leitch Report (2006), their model is neither unique nor entirely consistent with other sources, such as HEAR (2012).

Alternative models include Knight & Yorke’s (2004) USEM model of key components of employability (Understanding, Skilful practices, Efficacy beliefs and Meta-Cognition). However this has been criticised by Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) whose ‘key to employability’ model is well constructed, justified and user friendly (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Since it bases employability on ‘Career-EDGE’ (Career development learning, Experience from life and work, Degree subject knowledge, skills and understanding, Generic skills and Emotional intelligence), it reflects employer expectations and incorporates Reflection and Evaluation, Self-efficacy, Self-esteem and Self-confidence. They define employability as: ‘having a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful’. Although comprehensive and addressing some employer issues, this again partially resembles Yorke’s (2006) definition, similarly excluding supply and demand. However overall they offer relative ease of use, brevity and clarity.

Bearing in mind the above discussion, and mindful of key writers on the subject, such as Harvey (2003), Yorke (2006) and Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007), I have created the following provisional generic working definition:

(Graduate) employability is achieving a set of skills, knowledge, understanding, personal attributes and development of critical reflective abilities enhancing and empowering the learner that, depending on contemporary supply and demand plus individual availability (geographically or otherwise), make Graduates more likely to be able to select and gain employment and be more satisfied and successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the wider community and economy’. [Modified from Yorke (2006), Harvey (2003) and Dacre Pool (2007)].

By addressing the key issues for the individual, HE, the organisation and wider community and economy, this remodelled definition extends beyond requirements for simply securing employment. It incorporates graduate employability attributes, continuing professional development [CPD], plus
supply and demand as well as local to global considerations. Consequently it is more comprehensive and holistic than previous alternatives, so although more detailed, it embeds key considerations clearly and concisely without major omissions.

2. Influence of WR/BL on Employability

Overview

The relationship between WRL, (particularly WBL) and employability emerges from the literature as largely very positive, but with issues of possible barriers and employability measurement. The significance of stronger business-university collaboration is recognised by Wilson, (2012) while other writers including Pegg et al., (2012) emphasise embedding employability pedagogy into the WRL curriculum in order to enhance employability. An additional positive outcome to WRL appears to be higher academic achievement, although this may be inherent in uptake of WBL/WRL, especially sandwich placements (Green et al., 2012).

Students and employer engagement in WBL is reported as an employability issue by Tibby, (2012a) apparently reflecting differences in perceptions as above. Consequently, since barriers to WBL can reduce engagement, investigations by Lowden, et al. (2011) recommend that current policy supporting WBL provision and employability (Wilson, 2012; HEAR, 2012) needs effective implementation which incorporates greater meaningful employer involvement in HE. Similarly Ball, Collier, Mok & Wilson (2006) identified the student need of addressing engagement issues with well planned and organised WBL, supported by good communication and assessment methods. Although recent introduction of HEAR (2012) should largely benefit employability enhancement, it requires thorough implementation, prompt review, possible amendments and appropriate support, including harnessing the social revolution. Linked to these developments a need has emerged for clarity in acquiring generic ‘key’ (i.e. transferable) employability skills, (along with specific professional skills appropriate for each CoP), which could be supported by a suitable model such as that of Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) interlinked with specific CoP skills resources and development. For nutrition the latter should be consistent with AfN competency guidelines (AfN, 2012b).

Critical Discussion

a) Generic evidence:

This has been identified in the literature (e.g. Yorke, 2006 and Hill, 2012) as an area requiring more investigation and rigour. The most specific of an HEA publication series in this field is that of Little & ESECT Colleagues, (2006), who, by scrutinising evidence from existing literature, determined WBL enhances initial employability, provided various conditions are met to assure WBL quality. They also
expressed concerns for more research and that work placements alone do not ensure enhanced employability. These views are re-affirmed in other related HEA publications, whether generic, specific or both, some being referred to elsewhere in this paper, including Tibby (2012a & b) and Hill (2012) who provide summaries of the current evidence base. However the majority of existing evidence focuses on sandwich year placements, mostly with positive associations, but according to Bowes & Harvey, (1999) employment benefit varies depending on various disciplines and was shown by Blasko with Brennan, Little & Shah, (2002) to be lower amongst those entering HE when over 25.

Lowden et al. (2011), investigating employers’ employability skills perceptions in new graduates in Scotland, found overwhelming evidence from the literature and primary research that key HE stakeholders (students, graduates, employers and HEIs) recognised WBL’s value regarding graduate employability. Other findings included: differing concepts of employability, but a common focus on transferable skills and attributes; plenty of good practice, but variations, with some existing barriers and inconsistencies between HEI policy and employers’ requirements. Resulting recommendations included embedding employability support with meaningful employer representation in HEIs, and valuing placements and WRL. This is a detailed well designed two stage study using extensive case studies with different organisations, some being national or multi-national, making the findings more universal for the UK. Despite some variation in results, the value attributed to WBL in enhancing employability was consistently high from all perspectives.

b) Evidence from identified CoPs

Andrews & Higson’s (2007) MISLEM project is a well-constructed, complex, detailed two phase study in four countries (Austria, Romania, Slovenia & UK) within a business management CoP. It focuses on EU employability skills, by constructing universal employability competences suitable for HE, FE and vocational education, with potentially broader application. Its findings support a positive relationship between WBL and employability, with links to a large five year longitudinal UK study, which investigated business students’ employability skills, finding positive correlations between WBL and employability (Hall et al., 2009).

Evidence from business courses and broader HE areas is provided by Green et al., (2012), using a large varied sample (but mostly business CoPs and covering 2 graduating cohorts). They investigated whether employment at graduate level relates to undertaking a work placement year and accounted for various control variables (e.g. subject, tariff points on entry etc). Statistical analysis provided relatively robust empirical evidence showing placement year engagement to be significantly related to general and graduate level employment. Tariff points on entry and degree classification were
both statistically significantly linked to achieving graduate employment. This is a very well constructed sandwich placement study, but measures employability indirectly using first destination outcomes. Results suggest academic achievement is closely related to outcome measurement used, but does not identify whether this is a cause, effect, or combination.

A conference paper from Andrews, Clark & Higson (2011) investigating employability enhancement through WBL in UG engineering students, supported the merits of WBL but found ‘add–value’ difficult to assess and evaluate. They used a mixed methods approach informed by critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975), considering three aspects: student experience, pedagogic issues and employer perspectives. Although a rigorous approach is claimed, methodological details provided are limited, but refer to phenomenological analysis to explore causal mechanisms (McKenna & Laycock, 2004). Reproducibility for parallel studies would be hampered by lack of methodological detail, with quality implications. Rigorous student assessment is advocated, but without specific details. Their paper cites other research with positive findings, but indicates suitable approaches need more development.

Evidence from other CoPs suggests positive links between WBL and Employability, but with varying degrees of rigour. ASET supports investigations into WBL practice and provides links with a variety of CoPs and other placement related organisations on its website (ASET 2013a). It has also newly launched its good practice guide which contains new details of relevance here (ASET, 2013b).

For Nutrition, the AfN (2013) promotes the importance of accreditation in enhancing employability, but without direct reference to research or WBL, demonstrating development requirements. Nutrition, a STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics] subject, and the CBI/Pearson (2013) report on STEM recruitment demands are good, but work-readiness is a concern. Despite this, associated data from the AfN is lacking and excluded from course accreditation procedures (AfN, 2013b), which link to course review (AfN, 2012b). These matters need addressing and their value given increased recognition through professional development, requiring AfN engagement. A web-search of accredited UG UK nutrition courses revealed sandwich options as the commonest placement type available. Practice experience of the author and related placement providers (unpublished data) suggests demand and competition for placements is increasing. There is competition with related courses (particularly Dietetics), but viewed positively could offer partnership opportunities. To address supply, increased placement procurement and provision is required and from more registered nutritionists, with improved stakeholder engagement. Supervisory training, more consistency and nutrition-specific strategic policy development are other
needs. Practice in nutrition and specific cases suggests that WR/BL almost always enhances students’ employability and self-awareness, particularly through sandwich placements, which can be transformative and enhance academic achievement.

c) Employability Measurement
Measurement of HE employability is an on-going issue identified above and is often measured indirectly using first destination statistics and sometimes progression data. For example collecting DLHE data is now obligatory for UK UG courses in KIS ‘Unistats’ (HESA 2013b), asking if former students are employed, studying, neither or both, therefore recording employment status, not employability. Such measurement overlooks various employability factors identified by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), (e.g. local economy and geographical mobility) and measures employment not employability so requires further research and development.

b) Barriers
Harvey & Blackwell (1999) found a lack of work experience was a barrier for Art & Design students to gaining employment and entrepreneurship. More recently WRL/WBL barriers were researched for the retail trade by Ball et al., (2006), with resulting student emphasis on the importance of well organised placements and good communication. Although the CoP and placement types may have affected findings, nevertheless these show reasonable consistency with nutrition practice and inter-relate to employability through WRL/WBL. Key combined and often inter-related barriers identified are summarised below:

- Financial & renumeration (Ball et al., 2006)
- Lack of self-esteem/motivation
- High demand, limited supply
- Location/distance from home and accommodation
- Student maturity (HE entry > 25) (Blasko et al.,2002).
- Family etc commitments
- Low achievement
- Precise/unclear nature of placement (Ball et al., 2006)
- Underdeveloped interview or other skills/knowledge
- Inadequate pedagogy/organisation/communication (Ball et al., 2006)
- Assessment and evaluation (Yorke, 2010; Andrew et al., 2011; Lowden et al., 2011).
Conclusion

The aim and objectives have largely been met and the research questions addressed. The first proposition is supported by construction of provisional working definitions ideally for a generic HE framework. However, wider discussion and dissemination is required, since terminology inconsistency is an on-going issue with possible need for some flexibility (e.g. at CoP or local level). The second proposition’s main point is generally upheld, but with the proviso better employability measurement tools need development. Academic ability and achievement have been cited as possible enhancers and additional outcomes respectively (Green et al., 2012) and various barriers to WRL/WBL identified by Ball et al., (2002). These largely reflect nutrition placement practice. In some respects a Systematic Type Review may have been more suitable, but beyond the scope of this paper. Concluding key implications for research, policy and practice include:

Key generic points

1. Widespread terminology ambiguities need addressing and disseminating through policy and practice, with appropriate flexibility.
2. Research evidence in the literature normally strongly supports WBL enhancing employability (particularly initially), but varies in approach, rigour, reproducibility.
3. Both employability terminology and measurement require more research and greater attention within policy to better inform practice.
4. WRL, particularly WBL as sandwich placements, appears to enhance academic achievement, but uptake is higher amongst more capable students, requiring further investigation.
5. Barriers and overcoming those identified need further research.
6. Harnessing the social revolution has potential for WRL and employability developments, requiring attention.

Key points for Nutrition

1. Generic key points above are relevant.
2. Evidence and documentation regarding placements/WBL is lacking.
3. Awareness raising, endorsement and engagement by the AfN and other stakeholders including employers are required.
4. This is a course accreditation and Professional Development issue.

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