

## THE WORKPLACE WITHIN STUDY: ENHANCING WORK-RELATED SKILLS THROUGH SIMULATION AND REFLECTION.

Jane Stapleford, Head of Employability Office, Principal Lecturer and Teacher Fellow, Leeds Metropolitan University.

Liz Beasley, Academic and Educational Developer, Principal Lecturer, Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education. Leeds Metropolitan University.

### ABSTRACT

Through its commitment to enhancing the employability of its graduates, Leeds Met has created a wide variety of innovative and exciting work-related learning interventions. It embeds work-related learning, personal and career development planning into the curriculum of its 41,000 students studying a diverse range of courses. It emphasises the skills of reflection and highlights the key role of reflective practice in both study and the workplace.

This paper will consider two contrasting approaches to work-related learning and professional development and give an overview of strategies used for developing reflection skills.

Undergraduates can struggle to gain relevant work experience thus affecting their chances of gaining appropriate employment on graduation. Work-related learning modules have therefore been developed simulating desirable work experience and including career development planning and a reflective process. A complementary approach is used with post-graduate students undertaking part-time study whilst already working. The focus is on developing an understanding of the theory and research relating directly to their workplace through reflection on and in practice.

Through both formal and informal evaluation of these interventions it is apparent that effective work-related learning can be gained without entering the workplace but by involving employers in embedded projects and using simulation modules. It can also be achieved by utilising the workplace to enhance theoretical learning through encouraging students to reflect thus helping them to improve their practice in focus areas.

For a variety of reasons real work experience opportunities may not be available or viable but it can be effective to use employer led course-based projects and simulations as alternatives to real experience in the workplace. Also, reflective practice within the course should be used to improve professional practice, enhance self confidence and bring about professional growth to the benefit of the students and the workplace.

### INTRODUCTION

Leeds Metropolitan University (Leeds Met), a former polytechnic in the north of England, was awarded university status in 1992 and has a diverse student population of approximately 41,000 on a broad range of courses. These include single honours academic degree courses but the majority are professional or vocational courses including health, education, business, sport, art and design, social sciences and the built environment.

The university also has an excellent reputation for the employment outcomes of its graduates and is committed to both the internationalisation of its curriculum (AGCAS, 2005) and to enhancing the employability of its graduates in order to enhance their appeal and value to employers in the global labour market of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## EMPLOYERS' SKILL AND ATTRIBUTE REQUIREMENTS

Employers suggest that a number of attributes or qualities and task-centred skills constitute employability. These include effective learning skills, self-awareness, networking and negotiation skills, transferable skills, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, team working ability, the decision-making skills and the capacity to cope with uncertainty (Yorke and Knight, 2004)

Most definitions of employability include several "skills" but employability is far more than just a collection of skills (Harvey and Knight, 2003). There are many of these lists of employers' "requirements" arising out of a range of research over the last twenty years and some identify up to eighty attributes. Several authors have grouped these into "taxonomies" for example Lester (2003), Yorke and Knight (2004b), Harvey and Knight (2003) and the list of "Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" produced by the Association of Graduate Recruiters (1995). These lists need to be treated with some caution but certainly give an indication of employers' requirements and expectations and clearly demonstrate that far more attributes are needed than just subject-specific knowledge and skills.

An internal Leeds Met analysis is based on students performing an exercise where they analyse job adverts, person specifications and job descriptions and distil these to reach the essence of what the employer is seeking. Regardless of the job role itself students almost always identify about six skills, always including communication and teamwork and problem solving which will all enhance our graduates' employability.

There is a plethora of definitions of employability including one offered by the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (2003) which offers a comprehensive and illuminating definition appropriate to Higher Education (HE). Employability is a:

*"set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations".*

## EMPLOYABILITY AND WORK-RELATED LEARNING AT LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

In order to address the diversity of courses and students the Employability Office at Leeds Met develops and supports employability and work-related learning interventions embedded within the mainstream curriculum and tailored specifically to each course. It works with both undergraduate and postgraduate courses across all twenty-two Schools within the university. The Employability Office has a broad remit focusing on workforce development. It aims to enhance student employability, equip students with employability and career management skills and prepare students for lifelong learning.

A key feature of the approach has been the commitment to embedding workforce development issues within the mainstream curriculum wherever possible as opposed to providing sessions on a "bolt on" basis. Furthermore the emphasis has been on enhancing the existing curriculum and improving and capitalising on existing good practice. Although many courses did already implicitly address aspects of workforce development in the curriculum at Leeds Met but they needed repackaging to enable students to see clearer connections between their curriculum and the skills and attributes that employers are seeking and to enable students to promote themselves to employers more effectively. Work-related learning is designed to

address this by encouraging reflection on the experience and the ability to identify the learning that comes from working.

## NATIONAL DRIVERS TOWARDS EMPLOYABILITY AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Since the development and accreditation of workforce development is an increasingly important agenda for the government and for UK HE, employability initiatives in HE have been driven by the requirements of internal and external quality assurance agendas placing pressure on HE staff to address employability. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) imposes safeguards to quality and has produced a number of relevant quality assurance initiatives in the past few years including a “Code of Practice” (QAA, 2001a) with sections on careers education, information and guidance and work experience. The QAA also publishes “Subject Benchmark Statements” enabling course developers to benchmark their course curriculum content, style and assessment methods against comparable courses in similar institutions when devising or reviewing courses. These Benchmark Statements include reference to transferable skills, employability and work-related outcomes. The QAA Framework for HE Qualifications (QAA, 2001b), which provided the common underpinning from which the various subject benchmark groups derived their benchmarks, also expects coverage of six main skill areas one of which is “employability”.

The introduction of Progress Files in HE (QAA, 2001c) also required by QAA was originally a recommendation of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) and is a major initiative, which is driving and enhancing the integration of work-related learning in the curriculum. The major components are a reflective personal development planning process designed to be “a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development” and a portfolio of records of achievements, experiences and reflection. The development is not meant to be exclusively academic but includes personal, career and employability development.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK EXPERIENCE IN ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY

The development of employability skills and attributes has therefore, a major role in HE today. Employers want students “oven-ready” for work and evidence gathered for the National Committee of Inquiry into HE (1997) found that:

*“for many employers and graduates, work experience made a real difference, complementing “traditional academic skills” with a basic understanding of work. Indeed the strongest single message which the committee received from employers was the value of work-related experience”.*

It is now recognised that it is the learning that comes from the experience of work that is more important than the work itself. Many studies in the 1990s demonstrated that even when graduates had the skills and attributes that employers required they did not seem to have either the awareness of the value of these skills for the workplace or the ability to articulate them at recruitment interviews. Harvey and Green (1994) highlighted the discrepancy between employers’ perceptions of the importance of certain skills and their satisfaction with the attainment of those skills in graduates starting work. However it is evident that generic skills and abilities cannot be easily learned or developed without the subject discipline context (Clanchy & Ballard, 1995 cited in Crebert, 2004) so both aspects need to be integrated into the curriculum.

## REFLECTION AS A KEY FEATURE OF EFFECTIVE WORK-RELATED LEARNING

All the work-related learning strands encourage students to engage in reflection and reflective practice so that students learn from “doing”, through interaction with others and subsequently reflecting on this and their behavior with the objective of improved performance. Reflection encourages the students to focus

closely on themselves and to begin to understand the relationship between themselves and the context in which they are learning so this can be embedded in practice. The ability to reflect has been found to vary significantly from one student to another and therefore students are taught the skills they need to reflect and offered a range of tools, such as letter writing and storytelling, to encourage them to reflect in a genuine and focused way. Reflection has been seen to improve self awareness and self confidence as well as provide a vehicle for a deep level of learning in practice. The initial taught focus is placed on understanding the centrality of self in reflective practice and the recognition of personal learning. Once the students appreciate the nature of reflective practice they are encouraged to use the tools for reflection in the workplace and in work simulations and projects, with support from tutors.

## DEVELOPING AN EMPLOYABILITY RICH CURRICULUM

Much of the curriculum development work is focused on undergraduate vocational courses where for a variety of reasons good appropriate work experience is difficult to acquire. It isn't always possible or realistic for students to engage in paid employment or blocks of work experience or one-year placements, because of their personal circumstances. The introduction of university tuition fees in the UK and the increase in these in 2006 is having the effect of making students increasingly reluctant to engage in low paid or unpaid work experience unless it can be built into their studies and the normal degree time-span. Examples of impediments to appropriate work experience include the BSc (Hons) Counselling and Therapeutic Studies students who cannot work as counsellors because the British Association of Counselling accreditation is restricted to post 21 years.

For these and other reasons the Employability Office has been creative about developing work-related learning interventions that operate within the course curriculum. Wherever possible, students are exposed to real world organisational and other work-related issues through the use of projects, simulations, case studies, volunteering experiences and work placements etc. These provide opportunities for students to practice applying conceptual knowledge to the solution of workplace problems to develop a range of employability skills. These opportunities can also generate students' insights into their values and interests thus assisting them in planning their careers. This paper will outline some of the more successful and innovative of these.

Whilst many Leeds Met students are undertaking these vocational undergraduate courses the university also caters for a large market of mature students engaged in post-registration and post-graduate courses, particularly those from the health professions, business and education. Most of these will be working part-time and again, in order to enhance their employability and career progress, great emphasis is placed on the interaction of theoretical learning and experiences in the workplace.

Thus this paper will explore several ways in which the relationship between theory and work practice can be integrated to enhance the employability of the learner. It will give an overview of some innovative work-related learning interventions that both simulate the workplace and allow for exploration with a workplace using appropriate work experience in some cases involving employers who lead actual work projects. Each example is distinct in the way in which its students' specific needs have been addressed in designing the routes for work-related learning in the curriculum that are both practicable and attractive to the students.

## EXAMPLES OF WORK-RELATED LEARNING AT LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

### Example 1. Structured real work projects in the BA (Hons) Media and Popular Culture

The Employability Office began work with the BA (Hons) Media and Popular Culture (MEPOP) degree course in 2001 with a customised package of employability sessions delivered jointly by course teaching staff and the Employability Office. This programme focused on increasing both career opportunity awareness and the students' ability to market themselves. By 2003 the percentage of graduates entering employment from this course was high at 76.3 %. However many graduates struggled to find media related work because of the difficulty gaining relevant work experience during their studies. Therefore, in 2003 a compulsory and fully assessed work-integrated module that simulates work experience was introduced for Year 2.

The module consists of three main inter-related elements. Firstly, media professionals who are contracted for this purpose from the fields of heritage, public relations, radio, TV documentary and web design assign a real work project. Examples of these projects include a fifteen-minute broadcast for a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) current affairs program. Throughout the project the students work under the same codes of practice, legal and consumer restraints as in a real work situation, for example demonstrating impartiality for a BBC broadcast. The media professional acts as a mentor communicating mainly by email and having occasional scheduled meetings with the group thus providing extensive support.

Secondly, the students are required to investigate a career role of their choice and to develop a "Personal Career Strategy" which covers all aspects of work in this role including pay, entry and working conditions. The students analyse their own skills, interests and personal circumstances in relation to this role, and identify gaps in their knowledge and skills and areas for improvement. They consider the practical steps they could take to improve their chances of acquiring such a role; they create an action plan and a targeted Curriculum Vitae (CV) for an entry-level job in this field.

Finally, the third element of this module is a reflective log of both the processes already outlined. Reflection is encouraged both during the module and throughout the course as recommended by the Dearing Report (1997) and QAA (2000,c). Throughout Year 2 students are encouraged to reflect upon their work-integrated experience via a journal and to collect and record evidence of the range of employability skills and experiences for their portfolio. In Year 3 students continue to address the value of the learning from this work experience. This reflection forms the basis of further career development planning: revisiting the skills audits and the students' CVs, exploring career opportunities, and polishing their skills of writing applications and performing interviews appropriate for graduate level employment.

Each of the three elements is assessed. The group work project is assessed by a group presentation focusing on the group project topic and can use any presentation medium e.g. power point, video, CD Rom screening etc as long as it is appropriate to the project topic. The "Personal Career Strategy" may be a written project but can be presented in another medium or mixed media. The reflective workbook follows a structured format and contributes marks to the module.

A diverse team of teaching staff, career advisors, employability specialists and media professionals including those working in TV, advertising, journalism and heritage industries, designed this work-related module collaboratively. All these different professionals contribute to the delivery of the module and some sessions are delivered by team teaching. The media professionals are potential employers for the graduates thus giving the students insight into the attitudes and expectations of the type of employers they may strive to work for, giving them networking opportunities and in some cases work opportunities upon graduation.

The module is designed so that students develop an insight into a particular role; increase understanding of career management skills; develop practical skills relevant to their area of study; make contacts with real employers and develop the transferable skills of team working, action planning, and organisation.

Reflection on the learning is encouraged both during and after completion. It is essential part of the process and a significant element in the assessment of the module. As well as the assessable reflective log, in their final year students refer back to and reflect upon the work-integrated learning module and use their personal career strategy document to develop a new action plan to assist them in their transition into appropriate work.

The external examiner for this course commented “*[I was] impressed with how students had researched their chosen area of employment, evaluated it and linked their own preparation and skills to employers’ criteria.*”

#### Example 2. Enterprise and entrepreneurship via simulated work experience in BSc (Hons) Multi-media Technology

For the past four years the Employability Office has worked with the School of Technology in developing their ‘Enterprise’ module within the BSc (Hons) Multi-media Technology degree course. This module sits adjacent to and integrates with a Group Project module and the two modules together explore the themes of the workplace, enterprise and entrepreneurship, self-employment, career management and employability skills. Self employment is a realistic first destination for multi-media graduates and this module uses real world examples to simulate starting up a business.

The Enterprise module encompasses extensive work-related learning in the form of a simulated work project. It uses simulation as the vehicle to integrate subject knowledge, theoretical approaches and practical application in an organisational setting. Students liaise with a real company such as the Fire Services, the City Council or various charities. They work in teams to set up a company addressing issues including costings, premises, minutes of meetings etc. By adopting an experiential approach using a simulation a realistic learning environment is generated that stimulates the creative application of knowledge to a simulated real world situation. The modules provide students with experience of the competitive world of business organisations and this experience enables students to develop transferable business skills in preparation for employment or self employment

A series of input sessions from Business Start-up, the Employability Office, the Careers Office, and the Leeds Law School provide support for students. Sessions cover areas such as devising mission/vision statements and business plans, and provide information about the Prince’s Trust and other projects supporting entrepreneurial activity. The programme also covers enterprise, career management and other employability skills.

An essential aspect of the assessment for this work-related module is a reflective journal and these simulated projects provide rich material for reflection and exploring the application of the theoretical aspects of the course to the real world problems and issues they encounter during this work-related experience. Students reflect in action about their experiences and compare their behavior to theoretical approaches. This enhances performance and enables them to build a repertoire of behaviour and strategies that they may use in the future (Schon, 1983). Many final year students also use the credit-bearing portfolio of their experience and reflections to showcase their employability skills in real interviews and have found it helpful in securing work after graduation.

### Example 3. BA(Hons)/ MA Professional Training and Development part-time continuous professional development courses

The courses were developed as undergraduate and postgraduate routes for students who are working as adult educators in a broad range of settings. The majority of the students are working full-time in organisations such as the police, fire service, private training companies, banks, health sector or colleges. The breadth and range of experience is vast and all the students are mature (over 21) with at least two to three years of experience as an adult educator. Students enter the award with a range of qualifications from various awarding bodies, such as Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or City and Guilds Certificate in Education. An important part of the entry process is the recognition of this valuable prior learning both from the qualifications as well as the experiential learning. The process of accreditation of previous learning is supported through an initial module called “Accreditation of Personal and Prior Learning” (APPL).

The courses were originally designed to respond to the need for a challenging programme of in-service development for adult educators who were generally directed towards courses that had been designed for teachers in schools. There was a need for a more flexible programme that could meet the needs of these professionals and recognise the different approaches that they needed to adopt in their workplace settings. To understand the different settings, it is important to consider that the training approaches appropriate in a health setting, such as a hospital, should be and are, different from the approaches adopted in a private outdoor management training company or in a bank. There needed to be a recognition of the individual nature of the learning that was context led and the need to respect the students in that setting in terms of their learning.

The centrality of the student in the learning was key to the development of the course and it became clear that reflective practice would be the underpinning of the course. Moon has written extensively about the use of journals within professional education and has indicated that, “*Perhaps the most common use of journals in professional education is in the context of practice or in moving between classroom theory and situations of practice.*” (Moon, 1999)

The programme was designed to incorporate the principles of reflective practice both within and beyond the period of study and they are embedded throughout. All modules are assessed through a reflective practice assignment that is negotiated with a specialist tutor and is based in the workplace. The student is individually supported in designing a research question that will enhance their work as an adult educator through critical reflection. Brockbank and McGill describe the changes in the individual as transformatory, and support the idea that “*for transformatory learning to occur a congruity is required between what is espoused and what is practised....By transformatory we mean that the learner is encouraged to become a critical thinker according to the standards required of her discipline.*” (Brockbank and McGill, 1998)

Questions about the effectiveness of an evaluation process, or the use of training needs analyses might be posed, or perhaps the styles of teaching appropriate to the learners. The research is carried out in the workplace and the students are supported through e-mail/ phone or personal tutorial depending on preferred learning modes and distance of travel for the student. Many students choose to study this course in Leeds although they work and live several hours away from the University campus. The mode of delivery in blocks of one week of study every three months facilitates attendance for students living at a distance, and learning is then supported between block weeks through distance contact if needed.

The students are highly skilled professionals with excellent employability skills that have allowed them to reach a point in their careers where they are ready to undertake challenging study. The main purpose of the

course is to develop an understanding of the theory and principles of adult learning so that they can be applied to everyday practice on return to the workplace.

Boud and Soloman have recognised the changing nature of education with this approach and the potential difficulties in terms of quality, *“The movement to cross disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, the partnerships with organisations, the reframing of entry requirements that allow for, for example, non-graduate access to some postgraduate awards, mean that the predictability of knowledge learnt and academic knowledge learnt are no longer certain.”* (Boud and Soloman, 2001) It has been challenging to set specified learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are flexible and robust, but it has been achieved successfully and both have been rigorously reviewed through quality systems, and the achievement of the learning is highly praised by external examiners, and recently by the UK QAA. The use of reflective practice encourages critical thinking about current practices in their workplace and allows the students to consider new perspectives and approaches to integrate into practice.

In order to enhance work-related skills, students are taught how to reflect during their first accredited module, Self Development and Reflective Practice (SDRP). The module runs throughout the programme, alongside other optional modules. The module is a required element of study at all levels and is assessed through a learning journal and synoptic statement. Students are taught how to use reflective practice tools, such as journals, storytelling, unsent letters and the use of pictures/ artifacts to explore perspectives. Clearly, the development of the journal has ethical and confidentiality issues to consider, and they are explored carefully with all students prior to the requirement to discuss progress and reporting to tutors.

Journal entries can take a range of creative forms and personal preferred approaches develop as the journal progresses and individuals consider the benefits of different styles. A review session is held with a group of students after a three month period to consider the positives outcomes of the journal as well as the concerns and issues such as when and where to keep it. Sharing these issues is of significant importance and allows the students to explore new approaches and resolve concerns with others in a similar situation.

In the journal, students record their experiences or thoughts about adult learning issues and then link the experiences to relevant literature. The theory that is explored in this way then relates directly to the current experiences and the depth of learning is therefore accentuated. Students may for example have a concern about an induction programme and have recognised that their learners are losing motivation. Once the experience has been recorded, the student would then explore motivation theory and apply that to the situation, considering alternative solutions to explore in the workplace. The solutions may be explored from a number of perspectives, drawing on discussions with colleagues or a university tutor, and then applied and critically evaluated.

The journal entries are developed over a period of study alongside the module reflective practice assignments, and ultimately a synoptic statement is produced for the assessment of the SDRP module. The synoptic statement draws on all the experiences and explores strands or patterns that have emerged and requires the student to explain their own learning – it is described as a being in a helicopter and then looking down on yourself to see how you have developed. Strands often include time management, dealing with conflict, team working or approaches to learning. It is stressed to students from the first day that the journal is central to the learning process and that if successful at supporting the use of the journal then it will be maintained as a lifelong learning tool. The range of approaches that are adopted is vast and the process is individualised, allowing for research of a range of theory that could not be covered in any one course. The theory is directly and immediately useful to the learner which is what makes the approach so useful for students in the workplace with little time to devote to study that may not be relevant.

These are just a few examples of many innovative and exciting curriculum developments at Leeds Met which are constantly being evaluated, amended and enhanced following feedback from all stakeholders including students, teaching staff, employability specialists, alumni and employers.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective work-related learning can be gained by students studying at University without entering the workplace by involving employers in embedded projects and using simulation modules. There are several solutions to the problems encountered when student work placements are challenging to find, including simulation, course-based projects and bringing in expertise from workplace settings to support the learning. Involving external support from a range of work settings has added the benefits of engaging students in networking and having an opportunity to demonstrate their developing skills to potential employers. When students are asked to reflect on their practice within a work setting they are able to identify a range of solutions to real problems and consider appropriate actions.

For those students who are working and studying part-time in the context of their work, it can also be achieved by utilising the workplace to enhance theoretical learning through encouraging students to reflect thus helping them to improve their practice in focus areas. When students are encouraged to reflect on themselves and their personal, professional practice, they can identify immediate and relevant issues for study and exploration in the light of theory and alternative perspectives. On-going reflective practice, that is assessed as part of a programme, ensures that students reflect in the light of literature and consider application to their practice at an appropriate level of study. Students become more self aware and self confident as they develop skills of researching practice in action and reflecting on their own development.

- It is effective to use employer led course-based projects and simulations as alternatives to real experience in the workplace. Voluntary and community action projects, simulations and employer led projects all involve students in developing good working relationships, team working, communicating with others, practice in identifying and analysing issues, suggesting practical solutions, planning their own work schedules and gaining understanding of how organizations work. These are the skills and abilities required by employers. Students may also make contact with the public, clients, counsellors and other public service workers adding to their confidence in dealing with people in a work-related setting.
- Reflective practice within the course should be used to improve professional practice, enhance self confidence and bring about professional growth to the benefit of the students and workplace. The learning journal has proved to be an effective tool for the purpose of critical reflection with adult educators and when complimented by creative reflective tools such as storytelling, letter writing and the use of images it becomes a personal and individual process that is student centred and directly relevant to day to day learning in the workplace

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## CONTACT

Jane Stapleford  
The Employability Office  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
The Cottage  
Headingley Campus  
Beckett Park  
Leeds LS6 3QS  
West Yorkshire  
England  
United Kingdom

T: 00 44 113 2832600 Ext 5135  
F: 00 44 113 2838610  
j.stapleford@leedsmet.ac.uk

Liz Beasley  
Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Carnegie Hall  
Headingley Campus  
Beckett Park  
Leeds LS6 3QS  
West Yorkshire  
England  
United Kingdom

T: 00 44 113 2832600 Ext 3618  
F: 00 44 113 2838610  
e.j.beasley@leedsmet.ac.uk