

Work based learning in higher education: some dilemmas and challenges for staff development

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Introduction

This article addresses staff development questions arising from case study research into the depth and breadth of work based learning and accreditation of prior learning (APL), in a context including voluntary (or third) sector organisations based in South Wales. The questions emerge from the following three previous studies on work based learning and accreditation. The first was an earlier Transfine study on APL leading to a series of national case studies, one of which included Wales (Storan et al., 2003). The second study was a project commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government leading to the design and delivery of an accredited work based learning training programme for over 1000 Learning Coaches throughout Wales (Saunders, 2008), implementing the guidelines and principles of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). The third was a Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) project for the strategic development of high level learning for university workforces (Treadwell and Kennard, 2009; Addicott et al., 2009).

The Transfine study concluded that whilst there was much institutional policy that permits APL – including an abundance of quality assurance guidelines and regulations – there was a low level of actual participation and delivery. The Learning Coach programme revealed the importance of consortia based accreditation activity by a group of universities, but it also pointed to the need for more learner-friendly practices for work based learning – including assessment practices and the rapid provision of rewards in terms of credit transcripts and qualifications. The HEFCW research project involved a scoping exercise on workforce development associated with higher education support in a variety of sectors. It investigated higher level work based learning and included the accreditation of in-house training programmes, the provision of bespoke programmes by universities and the potential for recognition of prior learning (RPL). The scoping brief also gauged accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) expertise and the capacity of trainers working with not-for-profit workplaces.

Analysis of information in our study has included face-to-face interviews, desk research using primary and secondary sources, telephone surveys, focus group activities, workshop material, and the compilation of numerous case studies. Organisations participating in the contribution of data have included schools and colleges, youth worker organisations, professional organisations, the Welsh Assembly Government, careers companies, private training providers, and of course universities themselves. Particularly important is the

further inclusion of the third sector, which is so often marginalised from work based learning research. We therefore point to the involvement of a youth mentoring and coaching organisation, a UK wide voluntary agency, a national coordinating training body for Wales, a city based network, a focused operation on homelessness in local authorities, and an umbrella network representing the interests of minority groups.

Published conclusions have addressed a wide variety of accreditation and training issues, and one of these is of central importance for the current article: the need to develop more work based learning skills and expertise within the higher education workforce itself. The three studies generated a series of questions from stakeholders located in the private, public and voluntary sectors; queries that challenged the assumptions and even the complacency of higher education providers. A series of dilemmas have been developed, based on these challenges. They are fictionalised for use with a wide variety of audiences without identifying individuals, although it is emphasised that each one also draws on real feedback.

The twelve dilemmas

Scenarios present twelve dilemmas which have been used with a wide range of individuals working within higher and further education via workshop activities as well as more formal presentations on skills and work based learning. They have generated much discussion and action planning around the improvement of work based learning in higher education. Each dilemma is presented as a headline statement, followed by a more detailed statement or query which prompts discussion.

1. Transparency and jargon

‘What does this mean please?’

‘The ILOs and assessment strategy are set at L4 and L5 within the CQFW and lead to a mixed mode foundation degree award with a 2+1 progression route to the university’.

2. Suspicion

‘So the university wants to recognise our training programme for volunteers. They say it will give our volunteers credits which count towards one of their qualifications. They just want to do this so they hit their targets and get money. We are landed with a whole load of useless credits and paperwork. Our volunteers have to fill in forms and do coursework that frightens them. What’s in it for us?’

3. Mixed groups

‘This particular course includes three people with OCN [Open College Network levels] two and three qualifications, four people with NVQ [National Vocational

Qualifications levels] three and four, and five graduates. We can't split them up because they all work as a team and the numbers are not viable, so we want to train them together. Can we recognise their different backgrounds by giving them different assessments, and levels of credit?'

4. Short awards and giving reward

'Now that the course has finished, we are cheesed off. We got 60 level 4 credits, but we have still not got a recognised qualification. Instead a bunch of transcripts have arrived for the three modules that we successfully completed. We've heard that it won't be possible to get the Certificate of Higher Education until another 70 credits have been clocked up. Why on earth can't the university give us some kind of award at this stage?'

5. RPL and APEL

'We don't think that this level four course [actually] needs to be attended by half our people. Some of them have studied similar stuff in the past and they have got the qualifications to prove it. Some of the others have got lots of experience, and the course is just a repetition for them. You say that everything is based on learning outcomes; well in that case we would like both of these groups to get the credit but without having to attend the workshops or do the assignments.'

6. Accrediting community training

'For the last few years we've had these consultant trainers in, and they have run a course for our social enterprise staff and some community leaders. It's on Friday afternoons plus a few weekends over a period of about six months. We don't know what level it is in your world, but we think that some of the content seems pretty advanced and we think it might be worth having it recognised by a university. What would be involved if we did this, and what would it cost?'

7. Consortium activity

'Four universities are working together as a consortium on a 40 credit level 7 training programme; each of the partners is leading a 10 credit module. At the moment the learners get transcripts from respective registries following successful completion. The consortium now wants to extend the course into a Masters award but has to decide who has overall 'ownership' and quality assurance of the students and the programme. What criteria should they use?'

8. Bite sized learning

'A group of community students has just completed a short non-accredited project which included workshop support, individual tuition, and private study time - an

estimated 30 hours of learning time. The tutor thinks that they have achieved one of the learning outcomes within a larger module validated by the university. She reckons that this is equivalent to three credits, and has asked the registry if such small levels of academic achievement can now be recognised.'

9. Staff development

'Some tutors are fed up with their repeated use of portfolios, journals and reflective logs when assessing their students. The tutors think that they need some staff development and a 'toolkit' in order to develop more varied assessment techniques, as well as more imaginative ways of achieving learning outcomes.'

10. Credit and qualifications pathways

'Joe has applied for a degree course at the local university. Over the last five years he completed five non-accredited adult education classes, two OCNs at level two and three, and a series of corporate training packages for middle managers from a previous employer. Joe also successfully completed half of a level three national diploma at a further education college in Scotland before moving to Wales, but the only certification he has is from the OCNs.'

11. Crossing sacred boundaries

'A university compact initiative has led to the piloting of a level four module by a group of lower sixth formers, focusing on the key skill of critical thinking. The credits are included in their UCAS applications the following year. The head of the middle school thinks that this module might be very useful for a group of his Gifted, Able and Talented pupils, aged fifteen, and has asked the university compact coordinator if the pilot can be extended in this way.'

12. Tracking

'A six year objective one project has developed community learning initiatives in the valleys, leading into an intensive higher education access course. It is now moving into its final evaluation phase and the evaluators want to track the outcomes for *all* of the participants, including those who joined the project but did not progress to university.'

Conclusions

The workshops and presentations identified key themes for staff development and institutional change, with nine conclusions – by no means unanimous but in all cases deemed as worthy of future research - being noted. First, quality assurance can excessively dominate work based learning developments and inhibit risk taking, thereby slowing down innovation and change. Second, public sector providers of work based learning move too slowly when it comes to designing and validating new programmes for employers and workforces. Third,

there is a need for more focused and productive partnership working in order to avoid talking shops; otherwise employers will stop attending and participating within the planning of work based learning. Fourth, much work based learning delivery is effectively supported by one-to-one and small group support, rather than more cost-effective but impersonal classroom delivery. Fifth, whilst there is much policy support for demand led work based learning, this will require sophisticated brokerage by expert intermediaries between the public, private and voluntary sectors in order to ensure that appropriate providers deliver work based learning. Sixth, one of the key quests for higher education is to prepare workforces for the skills of the future, but much employer and community demand is for the mundane here-and-now skills that solve urgent problems and crises. Seventh, the language and vocabulary of credit frameworks and registries needs to be kept behind closed doors with a clear use of plain English when working with external stakeholders. Eighth, consortia based activity by colleges and universities leads to more trust and credibility with external organisations, as compared with aggressive marketing of work based learning by a single institution. Finally, there is a need to bridge the cultural and institutional gaps between the academic tribes, who live their lives within university faculties, and the external world of demand led training.

References

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