

Work-based Learning and Student Agency: Developing Strategic Learners

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Leisure

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Overview

- Introduction
- Three contexts: work, social, study
- Cross-section of two research studies
- Issues: identity, purpose, autonomy
- Student agency: research study 3
- Discussion

Introduction and context

- Employer-sponsored, health and social care Foundation degree students working and studying
- Low paid, largely female workforce, usually local, diverse in background. Highly motivated / typically low confidence in academic ability
- Drive for work-based learning from employers to 'upskill' (and retain) workforce
- Widening access agenda: typically NVQ2 / 3 on entry to Fd
- Growing need for recognition of student as agent

Study 1: A sense of identity

- Small case study, 1st cohort to complete programme
- Participants asked to discuss an ethical issue from their practice
- Interviews based on rational discussion and dialogue; participants as 'knowing subjects' (Prior, 1997)
- Acknowledgement of external factors, responsibilities eg to maintain confidentiality
- Interventionist stance as researcher, made explicit
- Primary interest in students' identity work, influences, reference points, their identification of issues
- Discourse Analysis

Discourses

- Of **reconciling, negotiating**- being the person having to carry out others' decisions while respecting the person's wishes
- Of a **personal engagement** with 'every day' ethical problems, less so with 'life and death' issues
- Of **membership**, role identity, confirmed by responses of service users / lack of a sense of membership, risk of passivity
- Of **category bound activities** – tension of working within limits of knowledge or safety, at same time as resisting a task-focussed approach, or worse, passivity
- Of **struggle**, a journey, reflective process even through interviews eg balancing individual rights and equality of opportunity with risk of harm to person or others

Learning context:

- Identity not professionally-constructed, explained through personal experience:
 - *'I remember when my mother was ill and trying to get treatment for her'*
- Rightness (or wrongness) of decision being contingent upon responses of others:
 - *'because the fact that he hadn't, they hadn't said anything to him, made me think that maybe that was because he wouldn't listen, maybe he had some sort of behavioural thing where, that wouldn't have made a difference, I was very prepared for him to get quite angry at me, when I said let's go and play in the corner, and I said 'Do you want to come and play in the corner?' - 'Yeah okay' and he put his arms up! For me to carry him - and I thought 'how simple was that? I could have done that before'.*

Study 2: A sense of belonging

Methodology:

- Ongoing, longitudinal research (2008 onwards)
- Qualitative approach
- 1:1 interviews with Fd graduates & current students
- Transcripts coded using thematic analysis

Initial Findings

- **Peer group networks**
 - active participants of social communities
- **IT skills**
 - vitality of IT skills
- **Employer's dilemma**
 - what can mobility mean for the employer?
- **Work Based Learning**
 - increased mobility offers enriching insights
 - lack of mobility raises feelings of dual identity and restriction

Work Based Learning

Increased mobility offers enriching insights

Quote: *"Yeah, because I think if I had been put into a placement or had a placement that was similar to what I do at work I wouldn't have gained much from it because I would..... it would be like being at work whereas by going to somewhere completely different um, made a huge impact on me. Yeah, my placements were fantastic. I really enjoyed all of them."* (FdR06)

Lack of mobility can raise feelings of restriction

Quote: *"It would have been nice to have not actually done the work based learning at my job just to be able to experience different placements, to be able to maybe shadow a social worker or, um a community nurse I mean that would have been quite nice, a nice experience, but it was just not something that I could do"* (FdR23)

Issues: identity, purpose, autonomy

Both studies identify:

- Reliance upon others for exposure to and reflection upon, learning opportunities / lack of autonomy
- Tensions between roles – student, employee, care-giver
- Lack of strategic approach to own learning needs; resentment of time spent negotiating Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard), lack of IT skills often masked by help from others, feelings of conflict being ‘student’ at work
- Identity defined by ‘place’ (student at University, manager at work) rather than internalised and consistent; lack of identification / exploitation of learning opportunities as a result

Student agency: research study 3

To develop a sense of personal agency, literature suggests students require:

- a need for ‘clear purpose and direction’ as motivator (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004: 115)
- Access to networks in workplace / beyond (Ashton, 2004) (increasingly virtual, national)
- A strategic approach to study (Entwhistle, 2000) which must include learning essential skills in IT, accessing information, self-regulating effort, understanding assessment demands, meta-cognition, sense of autonomy

Study 3: strategic learners and agency

- Collaboration: students, employers and programme team
- Aim is to learn broader lessons about developing curricula through inclusion of learner and employer voice at all stages
- Curriculum will be co-constructed, leading to better understanding of learning objectives
- Scope to assess value of virtual learning platforms such as EdShare to develop learning resources with employers, students
- Role of agency and strategic learning will be explicit, discussed
- By capturing the student voice, it is hoped employers and educators develop ways of promoting and supporting student agency across work, university and social contexts

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