

Mainstreaming work based learning through practitioner research: Insights from the Lifelong Learning Networks

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Abstract

The Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) aim to progress vocational learners into and through higher education. Much LLN work has focused on work based learning; ranging from staff development, progression agreements and design of new curriculum. This paper will synthesise research findings from LLNs in the field of work based learning, drawing out lessons learned in relation to overcoming challenges and enhancing widening access and student retention and success. More specifically, the paper will draw on research carried out in institutions as diverse as Southern Further Education College and a Northern University that have investigated the impact of different modes of practice on the strategic development and student experience of work based learning. A common theme is the need for greater industry involvement in the curriculum, including assessment which is often seen as the preserve of academics. The importance of this level of involvement for the genuine professional development of students is examined. The research suggests that there is a gradual, piecemeal evolution in the design and delivery of work based learning as academics gain a greater understanding of the needs of work based learners. As work based learning moves from the margins to the mainstream, an opportunity is opening up to share the results of these various pieces of action research and natural experiments, and to use them to challenge current

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assumptions and practices where necessary. We argue that active sharing is essential if the sector is to meet the challenges of workforce development in the current funding climate.

Key words: Work based learning, vocational learner progression, Lifelong Learning Networks, research synthesis.

Background and Aims

This paper has its origins within the Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) initiative in England, a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) initiative designed to:

“improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education”. (HEFCE, 2010).

In setting out his vision for the Lifelong Learning Networks programme, Sir Howard Newby stated that:

“if higher education is not adequately prepared to accommodate today’s vocational learners this reflects deeply ingrained cultural hostility to too close an association between intelligence and its application”. (Newby, 2005)

This ‘hostility’ may similarly be said to apply to the notion of work based learning, a pedagogic approach that has had to fight for legitimacy within the higher education sector.

The LLN initiative has always had a close link with work based learning. Its ‘vocational’ focus has ensured this to an extent, as has the emphasis on curriculum and pedagogic development within higher education to support the progression of vocational learners. This

has meant different things to different people, and it is perhaps important to remember that LLNs were intended to be “pilots and demonstrators” (HEFCE, 2009), some aspects of which would not work, others which could model the way forward on a much wider scale. Some practitioners have taken this opportunity not only to put structural changes in place (for example, set up progression agreements) but also to reflect and innovate around what it means to learn in a vocational context. And this in turn has led to experimental, reflective and scholarly work within the field of work based learning.

It is interesting to note that the LLN initiative took place in England at a time of renewed interest in the idea of work based learning in higher education (HE). Within the same timeframe, HEFCE was also running out the Employer Engagement (later Workforce Development) initiative which offered substantial funding to develop employer-led programmes of HE, including well-resourced Higher Level Skills Pathfinder projects in three English regions. Foundation Degrees, with their compulsory work based learning element, were also ramped up significantly during this time with incentives in the form of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) when such funding was increasingly difficult to come by. LLNs, therefore, were developed and run at a time when work based learning in HE was directly rewarded, perhaps more than at any other time. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that while work based learning was not an explicit goal of the LLN initiative, many LLN teams chose to focus in this area.

This paper aims to synthesise research, scholarship and evaluation on work based learning from within the LLN community and outline any new insights that result. The synthesis was undertaken following a substantial piece of work by the authors in identifying and cataloguing research carried out by or for the 30 LLNs across England. The resultant database represents a non peer-reviewed body of work, mostly unpublished elsewhere, capturing primary research, literature reviews, evaluations, market research and action research from within the LLN community. As a repository of information it provides a snapshot in time of a particular initiative, and also a source of data for further research. However it is worth noting

that the aims behind much of the work were not purely research-related and that the quality of the research design is somewhat uneven.

For this study, the authors examined seven papers from the database, one of which contained a number of sub-papers, and two of which were sector-based literature reviews. All seven are currently unpublished and therefore represent “grey literature”. Because of the uneven quality of the research, as mentioned above, no attempt was made to undertake a rigorous literature review or synthesis, rather the contents of the papers and some of the more rigorously evidenced conclusions were used alongside wider literature to examine issues in WBL and seek new insights. The views and perspectives of practitioners contained within the papers were used as a source of primary data in their own right.

The authors of this paper are members of the LLN National Research Forum which seeks to develop, promote, synthesise and disseminate research from within this initiative and its legacy community. As such, this paper represents a practitioner-researcher view. All three authors are, or have been, directly involved as practitioners in individual LLNs, some at senior level, and all are active researchers. Furthermore, the authors of the individual studies that make up this synthesis are themselves practitioner-researchers, some undertaking pedagogic research for the first time through LLN sponsorship. In this way it may be said that the LLN programme has made a contribution to bringing work based learning research into the mainstream of HE, including HE in further education (FE). This leads to the secondary aim of this paper, to argue for the importance of practitioner-researcher networks and the need for a spirit of reflection to be built into HE initiatives in order to draw out their full value. This, we believe, helps to extend engagement with research domains such as work based learning, has the potential to offer new insights and, indeed, represents work based learning in its own right.

Conceptualising work based learning

An initial examination of scholarly output on the subject of work based learning from within the LLN programme, coupled with the authors' own experience, suggests immediately that work based learning is a very broad church indeed. In the 1980s, Levy, Oates, Hunt, and Dobson (1989) initially defined work based learning as:

“linking learning to the work role”. (Levy et al, 1989)

Within this broad definition, a later distinction was made between learning for work, learning at work and learning through work (Seagraves, Osborne, Neal, Dockrell, Hartshorn and Boyd, 1996). In HE, examples can be found for each of these definitions. And Nixon, Smith, Stafford and Camm (2006) include in-house continuing professional development (CPD), part time taught and research programmes, foundation degrees and negotiated work-based programmes in their definition. Of course each of these provide a very different learning experience, often based on quite distinct pedagogic approaches and, indeed, epistemological positions. It was apparent to us in conducting this study that although work based learning is now a mainstream concept and indeed is a compulsory element of Foundation Degrees, it is still to many people synonymous with transactional arrangements such as classic work placements, and in this way is often being ‘contained’ within traditional provider-led approaches to curriculum rather than acting as a transformative practice as suggested by Boud and Symes (2000).

It also became apparent throughout the study that different vocations tend to have developed their own traditions (scholarly and practice-based) of work based learning, and that as a result, those writing on the subject varied enormously in their approach. So, for example, the material we examined ranged from a short reflection on the practical aspects of work placements (McConnell, 2007) through to highly theoretical material on conceptualising employer-led learning (Holmes, Hooper, McDonald, Bridger and Shaw, 2009).

We also note that the growth of HE in FE, and the closer relationships between HE and FE institutions engendered by the LLN programme, represent potentially fertile ground for innovative development in work based learning by bringing together sector-based practitioner traditions with more general pedagogic research. This is a feature that appears to be lacking in the literature, for example the specific role of HE in FE is not particularly remarked upon in the Nixon et al (2006) study. Two of the studies that we examined (Painter, 2009 and Hotham, 2009) represent scholarly output from within a LLN sector group in which academic staff with strong vocational backgrounds were supported to engage with scholarly pedagogic literature. These literature reviews produced a different though valid account of the practice of work based learning in higher education than that familiar to the authors, and challenged our own conception of the field.

Challenging relationships – employer-led learning

One of the themes emerging from the study was the concept of challenge. Work based learning was often found to challenge the learner, sometimes the employer and, in the case of more innovative practice, the very foundations of higher education as an academic-led endeavour. Some of the work also challenged our understanding of the learner-employer-institution stakeholder groupings. The notion of challenge to the academy is often found in the work based learning literature (for example Boud and Symes, 2000), however the idea of challenge to the learner and the employer is less often remarked upon. However, as Little and Brennan noted:

“The aspect that distinguishes WBL from other processes of learning is the part that negotiation between individual, employer and the higher education institution plays”. (Little and Brennan, 1996: 10)

The idea of a learning programme being negotiated is not a familiar one to most people and may be a source of challenge to all parties when compared to the more comfortable

experience of selecting, delivering or undertaking an “off the shelf” programme of study. Furthermore, it raises uncertainty about the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder and has the potential to create areas of disputed territory.

A notable example of this was found in Holmes et al (2009), a comprehensive study that was jointly supported by the Yorkshire and Humber East LLN (YHELLN) and the ESCalate Higher Education Academy (HEA) subject centre. The study drew on group and individual interviews and documentary evidence, together with wider literature, adopting a grounded theory approach to develop a theoretical account of the relationships and pedagogy involved in an employer-led learning network. One of the authors of this paper was directly involved in commissioning this research and so was able to add additional observations over and above those reported in the final project report. The study was based on the authors’ close engagement with an employer-led network that engaged actively with learning, supplemented by interviews with key stakeholders and a series of literature reviews adding depth to emerging themes.

The employer network in question had developed over a number of years, initially championed by the local authority but driven forward by a visionary individual from within the local college’s commercial training arm together with a core group of enthusiasts. Most of the members were from local medium-sized manufacturing firms, including some food processing companies and two oil refineries. Academics also formed a part of the group; two staff members from a university centre for lifelong learning were full members of the group and other academics were invited in to specific events. However the network was very firmly employer-led and represented an attempt by the companies to improve their efficiency through the use of the latest management theories.

What was apparent to the researchers at the point in time at which the research took place was the agency shown by the employers in sourcing and bringing in appropriate learning. The network was defined as a ‘high involvement’ environment leading to an ‘expansive’

approach to learning among the employers. This positive orientation towards learning had resulted in the local university being asked to provide various modules and short-cycle awards, mainly to middle managers. This had evolved to the extent that in-house programmes were being co-delivered by employers, who were also involved in co-designing, but not carrying out, assessments as noted in a complementary piece of evaluation (Shaw, 2009). Assessment represented an area for development, and one of the authors of this paper directly observed an untapped potential in one of the in-house HE programmes to bring together existing staff development tools with the accreditation methods used. This could have brought additional benefits to the learners and their organisations in making explicit links between tools for self-evaluation of job performance and the application of theory in the workplace. As an early years professional remarked in a literature review:

“The literature reviewed suggests that this is a complex and emerging area of development for both employers and higher education providers but that evolving connective tripartite assessment models may be a way forward.” (Painter, 2009:1)

We would propose from both a practitioner and a researcher viewpoint that this remains an area for development, and that there is much scope for innovative approaches in any sector that values reflection. Given the current focus on the Lean philosophy, this certainly includes the manufacturing sector in addition to the more obvious candidates of health and social care (Holmes et al, 2009, Shaw, 2009).

Within the Holmes et al (2009) study it was also clear that considerable learning was taking place through the activities of the network itself, usually involving more senior managers. HE staff were involved in these activities as members, and academics from the university (and other institutions) were invited to speak at a series of ‘learning forums’, but did not take any kind of privileged position within this learning environment. Indeed, it was so employer-led that it did not prove possible to package it within any kind of formal learning

programme (nor did the members of the network seem to want this). Furthermore, a culture had been created in which situated learning and practical application of theory were privileged – to the extent that the author witnessed the group ‘reject’ an invited academic speaker for being too theoretical in a fascinating reversal of the usual patterns of symbolic violence.

Another challenge presented to the institution, and reflected upon in Holmes et al (2009) involved the concept of ‘level-ness’. In several instances, the network had requested that the same learning opportunities (workshops, peer-discussions etc) should be linked to work based learning programmes offered at different Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) levels. In other words it was proposed that ‘level-ness’ is based on how an individual engages with learning opportunities, not the opportunities themselves. This was perceived as too challenging by the quality assurance team at the university and so could not be pursued.

Another feature of the network was the strength of the partnership between employers (usually senior managers) and learners (usually middle managers). Staff at both levels were involved in network activities, and middle managers were sometimes encouraged to join the network. One of the authors of this paper observed learners who were undertaking QCF Level 4 work based learning modules being brought into the network and championed as protégés. This was made possible by the fact that a highly positive approach to learning was normalised within the network. A possible corollary is that the partnership between academics and individual learners, and academics and individual employers, may have been weakened as a result.

Group and peer learning

Another theme that emerged from the literature was that of group learning. The type of learning observed within the employer-led network in the Holmes et al (2009) study (see also Stakes, 2009) and internally to one of the companies within the network (Shaw, 2009) had much in common with Senge’s concept of team learning (Senge, 1990). As such, we propose

that a tension is set up between the academic institution, who is concerned with assessing and accrediting and individual, and the employer, who is concerned about the performance of the team. This is not an unusual phenomenon and has been discussed elsewhere (for example, Eraut, 2002) but we propose from a practitioner point of view that this tension is still hampering efforts to engage employers fully with work based learning and to give them its full potential value.

However one impact of individual learning that did appear to have a positive benefit for employers was that, in the case of an in-house HE programme, it:

“pushed [learners] into reading more of the theory” (Shaw, 2009).

This led not only to improved practice, but also to sharing of theoretical concepts in the form of peer learning leading to reflection and further improvement of practice. This dynamic was also observed within the employer-led network studied by Holmes et al (2009) in which both practical and theoretical learning was shared and discussed by senior people from different manufacturing companies. To understand the potential implications and benefits of this we turn to the early years sector. As part of the professionalisation of this sector, the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) has been established as a post-graduate professional accreditation underpinned by work based learning, and also a role within the early years setting. As a role, EYPS are responsible for developing other staff in the setting, and the setting itself, by drawing on up to date sector knowledge. This role was envisaged as a “pedagogical leader” role (Kagan and Hallmark, 2001:10, cited in Painter, 2009:4) who could interpret research and theory for other practitioners. Within the employer-led network, it was notable that not one but many of the members acted as pedagogical leaders, either by sharing things that they had read or by seeking out appropriate academic speakers via the academic partners within the network. The impacts of this on the members of the network and the performance of its individual companies were not fully evaluated, but are likely to raise interesting questions

for the higher education sector, not least what kind of role they might play in such a network. In posing such questions we echo Gallacher and Reeve (2002) who stated:

“work based learning is not just the transplanting of existing programmes into the location of the workplace, but a more radical change in the focus and process of learning” (Gallacher and Reeve, 2002: 5 cited in Holmes et al, 2009)

However, as noted earlier, it was clear from some of the other papers consulted for this study (McConnell, 2007; Murphy and Taylor, 2008 and, to an extent, Hotham, 2009) that large parts of the higher education sector, perhaps the majority, have not yet engaged with such a radical change.

Crossing boundaries

This takes us back to a more canonical view of work based learning, an ‘inside-out’ view in which learning is positioned in relation to the academy, looking ‘outwards’ at the world of work, rather than the ‘outside-in’ view of employer-led learning that looks ‘inwards’ to the academy for support. A theme that emerged in this context was one of boundary crossing. A practitioner view was provided by Murphy and Taylor (2008):

“The representation of industry in a college environment is vitally important to prepare learners for the application of their acquired knowledge if and when they become professional in their given discipline. Many of the learners became enthused and encouraged by the new perspective this module brought to their studies. The difficulties arose from the sometimes contradictory nature of educational expectations and industry requirements.” (Murphy and Taylor, 2008)

This paper represented a reflective ‘thought piece’ on the experience of work placement. As a practitioner view, this appears to be fairly straightforward: students undertaking initial qualifications learn a lot from industry-led learning (in this case a module delivered by practitioners in the equestrian industry) but find that there are conflicts between their academic learning and what is required in practice. Constructivists, however, may identify this as an inherent part of the work based learning praxis that, far from being problematic, leads to deeper levels of learning. Moving between the academic and practical worlds may be viewed as a form of boundary crossing, of which Tuomi-Grohn and Englestrom (2003) state:

“polycontextuality means that experts are engaged not only in multiple simultaneous tasks and task-specific participation frameworks within one and the same activity and are also involved in multiple communities of practice ... [thus] boundary crossing between communities of practice... Boundary-crossing is a broad and little studied category of cognitive processes... Crossing boundaries involves encountering difference, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore, unqualified. In the face of such obstacles, boundary crossing seems to require significant cognitive retooling” (Tuomi-Grohn and Englestrom, 2003:3-4, cited in Painter, 2009)

Thus moving between the two worlds is a significant learning experience in itself, whether inside-out, outside-in or, in the case of pedagogical leaders, occupying a boundary position.

Work based learning and the ‘business’ of higher education

Throughout this paper we have used material from a number of practitioner-led research projects together with theoretical material drawn from literature reviews originating from within the LLN initiative, supplemented by additional literature. While the insights we have uncovered through this process may not necessarily be original within the community of work based learning innovators, we realise from carrying out this exercise that practitioners throughout the country are grappling with these issues on a daily basis. This is perhaps unsurprising given the pace of change within higher education over the last ten years, stimulated by the introduction of foundation degrees, the huge expansion of HE in FE, the push towards employer engagement, and the widening participation/inclusion agenda, all of which have prompted a need for different approaches to learning and teaching without necessarily prescribing the solution.

The study demonstrated to us that the relationship between the learner, employer and institution still has the potential to be challenging in many instances, with areas of disputed territory and unspoken assumptions that make the WBL endeavour difficult to scale up beyond the:

“cottage industry supported by enthusiasts” (Nixon et al, 2006:13).

Concerns such as the ‘ownership’ of knowledge, the accommodation of group learning and the respective roles of each partner still continue to cause conflict and can severely limit the effectiveness of WBL initiatives. However it also illustrates that this challenge is not always negative, and that crossing boundaries can be an uncomfortable yet positive experience for learners, which presumably could also include HE practitioners and employers. The real challenge will be to ensure that this experience is used as a springboard for positive change rather than an excuse to abandon the endeavour altogether.

In order to support this, we argue for a much broader sharing of knowledge between practitioners and researchers in the HE sector, including contextualising practice through

theory, not only through valuable networks such as UALL, but also linked to investments and innovations in the higher education sector such as the Lifelong Learning Networks and the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

We believe this should be based on a 'long, thin' approach that extends beyond the life of each initiative and links in a more systematic way with CPD for staff in HE institutions. A greater consideration of this issue by funding councils, we believe, allow the sector to gain better value from each initiative. In particular, creating feedback from practitioner experience into the more theoretical research domain, and in turn making this research more available to practitioners, would be one way of ensuring a lasting legacy and go some way to avoiding the sense of reinventing the wheel that can accompany new initiatives.

We also argue for such knowledge sharing not only with academic staff in universities who may already be well served, but for those delivering HE in FE, and those on non-academic contracts. It is worth noting that within the LLN initiative, as with Aimhigher before it, many key individuals were recruited from outside the HE sector as well as from the pool of professional management staff within universities and colleges. As such, their only contact with theoretical material and research evidence on subjects such as work based learning may well come from initiatives such as the LLN National Research Forum and the efforts it is making to support and disseminate research from within its community of practice, and to link it to wider research and theory. Thus we (rather grandly) position ourselves as pedagogical leaders making inroads into the mainstream 'business' of higher education with our insights, syntheses, hints and tips drawn from theory and research, and generally to encourage a community-wide approach to work based learning among our peers.

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Jan Wise has spent many years as an FE curriculum manager with extensive teaching experience in secondary, further and higher education. She is also an examiner and quality assurance verifier for an awarding body and member of the Chartered Institute of Assessors. Working for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Lifelong Learning Network 2007-2009 as Credit and Progression Manager, Jan gained an interest in RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) and developed a system to fast track private trainers into initial teaching qualification; this led to freelance consultancy work and research. Jan is Director of JW Education and Training, specialising in careers advice and guidance, research and writing.

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