Enhancing and embedding work-related learning: innovative practice in an Interiors programme

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Introduction

> *'Human Learning occurs when individuals, as whole persons (cognitive, physical, emotional and spiritual), are consciously aware of a situation and respond, or try to respond, meaningfully to what they experience and then seek to reproduce or transform it and integrate the outcomes into their own biographies'* Jarvis, Holford & Griffin (2006)

This paper presents two case studies - Work Placement Initiative and Action Workshops - of embedding work-related learning into studio practice on the Cass Interiors course, to simulate a professional studio scenario where students are actively working and collaborating. The aim was to instil more relevance to the workplace and engagement where the student is actively in charge of making decisions, planning directions and altogether more confident in the process and therefore treating the college environment as they would in a professional scenario.

Rationale

The Work Placement initiative was introduced on the basis of 3 key considerations that led to the need to bring professional working practices into the studio:

1. That the aims of the course include a strong 'vocational' strand within its academic objectives. It is important to work closely with the industry not only to keep pace with current demand and given that technology improves constantly, so the course needs to prepare the students with apposite skills to be both employable and immediately effective (Andrews and Russell 2012), but also this gives students an opportunity to be a part of a team working culture where approach and positive behaviours are critical (Cole and Tibby 2013).

2. The students want to be Interior designers, which they signal within interviews and personal statements (for example: *'I am sure that studying Interior Design would give me a great start in my future career and I would become a successful interior designer'* - a*pplicant to Interior Design 2013).

3. Professional experience brings a context and relevance to the academic projects and modules, therefore enabling the students to participate more wholly within their projects as they grow in confidence and understand the objectives of being reflective as a strategy (Daniels and Brooker 2014). As a result their projects are more professionally delivered, providing improved career opportunities as evidenced within the 2014-5 DLHE results which show that 100% Interior Architecture and 93.3% Interior Design students gained employment.

All this suggested the need for 'real life experience' or at least an understanding of real time working practices actively driven and motivated by the student. It was therefore about enabling that the student was in control of the progress and success of their project rather than adopting a more passive position.

Implementation of work-related learning

Stage 1 was to develop work placements to firstly establish active real- time working practices where initiative, positive attitude and team work are intertwined into the larger scenario, which is that projects matters to others. Interiors practice, being team-based, is dependent on many consultants of scale and manufacture, working together effectively and hopefully to create spaces which are fault free. The work produced has to meet deadlines; designers are constantly in dialogue and discussion to meet needs, regulations and satisfy budgets.

Using a wide range of Industry contacts built up from my own former career as an Interior Designer, I established a work placement programme, where second-year students spent 2 weeks within professional practice. This was embedded within the subject specific module in level 5 and as such the students received preparation workshops beforehand and professional feedback following. The students were asked to submit a reflective dairy describing, discussing and reflecting on all they encountered within the two weeks, the company, its projects, its structure and its studio layout. Who did they work with? What were they asked to work on? How they met the challenge. Did they have to rapidly learn new software? Did they socialise and have lunch together? It was a reflection where they appreciated the full value of an experience. Many added comments that highlighted how delighted they were that their projects had been sent to the client, they had not realised that their contribution had a real value.

In Stage 2, using a constructivist (Biggs 1996) and experiential pedagogy of experience and reflection (Schon 1987), I created a programme of preparation workshops, placed mid-way through the year and ahead of work placement. These classes explored team working attributes and responsibilities within the workplace, and also discussed how this experience would energise ambition, boosting the students' expectation of themselves, empowering a better strategic approach to

their projects, improving output within the college studio and therefore increasing quality and student experience. At the same time what is also being cultivated is our reputation, which is evidenced through the positive comments from professional practice about how students took the placement seriously, adapted quickly and fulfilled tasks above expectations.

From these initial workshops the students took an extra dimension of understanding to the work placement, they saw themselves as more informed, empowered and more assured of their role within the placement and how they could make the very best of the experience – as revealed in the following quotations typical of their feelings:

> 'Looking forward to the placement… so excited, '(JS 2017)
>
> 'This is really daunting as they are expecting me to work as a professional but I'm ready for it' (GH 2017)
>
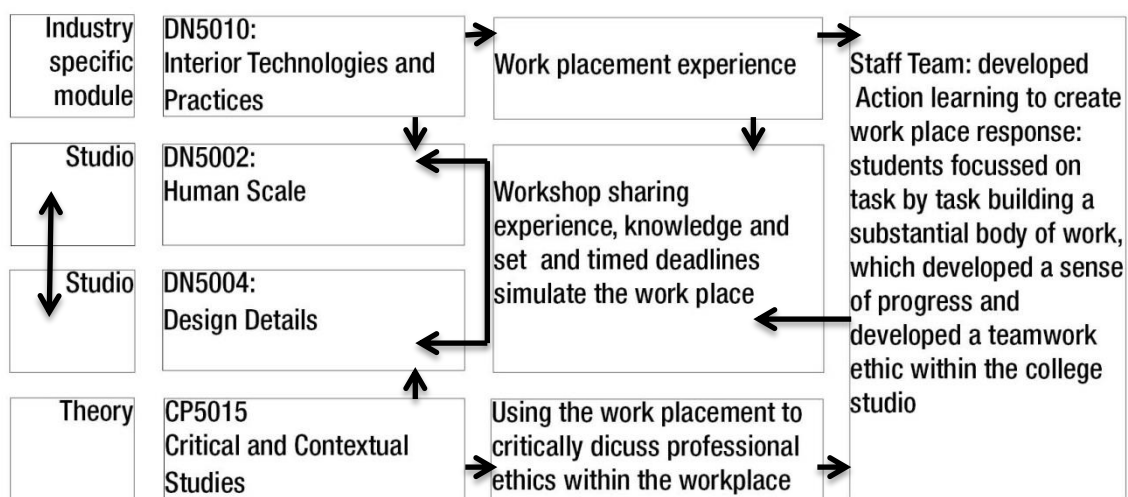> 'Ive really enjoyed the placement, the pressure was exhilarating (JF 2017)

When the students returned to class and to discuss their work related experience it was wonderful to hear the stories of success demonstrating how they had approached and engaged in professional projects. The sense of achievement was enormous. One third were asked to return and continue the placement, all increased their networking circles, experience for their CVs, self-directed knowledge of software, confidence to work through challenges, and understanding of the relevance of professional behaviour. Seeing this initiative made such a difference to their learning and professional experience also brought to the staff a new perception of preparedness for the workplace.

However what became apparent within a short space of time was that the students reverted to previous learnt behaviours that they had associated with classes. Once again they demonstrated a passive attitude waiting to be informed and waiting for tutors to start the class before they open their laptops.

This realisation inspired Stage 3 and the next series of action workshops that started to really address how to embed professional practice into the studio. Our studio projects are yearlong; the summative submission points are at the end of the year. Whilst this allows the students to receive feedback constantly throughout the course of the projects, to improve their outputs for their final submission, it perhaps insets a lack of pace and response which doesn't respond to Industry requirements of having a daily work ethic meeting frequent deadlines and responding in timely fashion. We as studio leaders do intend this to happen, and, as reinforced by Dyke (2006), teachers have a role in setting up experiences that can lead to prompt learning, through sharing experiences and exposing ideas to the critical gaze of the others. Imaginative teachers can create learning activities that enable these events to be transformed into knowledge (Boud 1998).

We needed to establish and illustrate how the course in itself was a team of consultants, a set of deadlines and parameters to meet and be guided by our peer based teams. All outcomes mattered in terms of interrelated knowledge and the pursuits of an individual affecting others by increasing quality, effectiveness and reputation amongst other attributes. Hence, we have carefully devised the Interiors courses so that content and focus of the yearlong modules relate to one another in an integrated model.

The diagram below (Interiors Level 5, four x 30 credit modules) is a working programme proposed to the Interiors team, demonstrating how knowledge and relevance of each of the level 5 modules feed into each other. It illustrates how through the action workshops, knowledge and input from the work placement could be integrated into the "college" studio.

Industry specific module	DN5010: Interior Technologies and Practices	Work placement experience	Staff Team: developed Action learning to create work place response: students focussed on task by task building a substantial body of work, which developed a sense of progress and developed a teamwork ethic within the college studio
Studio	DN5002: Human Scale	Workshop sharing experience, knowledge and set and timed deadlines simulate the work place	
Studio	DN5004: Design Details		
Theory	CP5015 Critical and Contextual Studies	Using the work placement to critically dicuss professional ethics within the workplace	

The action workshop would address a part of the studio project and ask the students to work on several aspects, for example, to ascertain the identity, spatial experience and function of a space, in this case two retail outlets (a fashion shop and a café). The students worked within teams and were responsible for the delivery their colleagues' ideas as much as their own. The work shop progressed work at a certain pace, by setting daily (within timetable studio sessions) deadlines.

Learning outcomes

To the students the workshops were a little stressful, but a great achievement, fun, eventful and all were fascinated with each other's approaches, witnessing many ways to read a brief, take information from shared research and develop business and community models and concepts. The students taught themselves new programmes, new ways of communicating ideas, just as they do within their work placement, and the amount of accrued and collaborative work was substantial and in some respects, catapulted the students design development beyond normal known parameters. It also highlighted that some students who generally underperformed within the

classroom developed more rapidly in this scenario, therefore increasing the distance travelled.

Following the workshops, the students and the team discussed what this had brought to the studio scenario. The students commented how they now realised more about themselves, the choices they made, their own personal interests and how they were fundamentally involved in decision making. They understood that being creative needs a level of research and understanding and that the client doesn't prescribe the format of the presentation and that ideas can be delivered in many formats and therefore could be another way of expressing your individual attributes. The workshop helped towards the main studio project by having the same context, site and community, so the students had a good deal of understanding before they followed with this a new brief.

The majority of design-led teaching suggests it reflects the process of the industry and its workplace. In some respects, however, the studios don't achieve this, as the connected reactions and responses from students will only naturally occur and be meaningful when the scenario of action and deadlines are simulated.

To continue to implement work-related learning within the core level 5 curriculum I asked the CCS (Critical and Contextual studies) tutors to utilise the work placement experience as case study to demonstrate professional ethics that govern standards, sustainable practice and workplace compliance and behaviour. The staff were able to direct the students to critically analyse the professional practice that the students had been a part of and look at it from their own position as a junior designer.

Conclusion

Overall, these work-related learning innovations exceeded expectations as the feedback from the students was very positive: they felt they were involved understood the work was relevant to their learning and also to the industry. The staff team were able to enjoy the outcomes of this successful approach, as it brought the workplace experience from one module across into the whole course, where they were able to recognise the relevance of the other modules in respect to the total course specifications and the whole learning environment. It also illustrated how our professional skills needed refreshing, but that working in the context of others brought opportunity and collaboration that working in a singular capacity could never do.

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Biographical note

Kaye Newman began teaching in 1996 at London Metropolitan University (then London Guildhall University) whilst still a practicing Interior Designer. The two careers merged and ran alongside each other until 2006 when she became Course Leader of Interior Design and Technology BA (Hons). From that point, she has actively participated in curriculum development, building active strategies around work-related learning and writing several new courses. Her approach is towards preparing students for a career in design using constructivist pedagogy and an active approach to enrich the student learning and experience with live projects, workshops, and practice-based learning - providing co/extra-curricular activities that enhance and strengthen the relevance of the curriculum.