

Work-based learning in higher education – approaches and application to promote social justice

Olaide Phillips

London Metropolitan University

Keywords: *work-based learning, psychology, social justice*

Introduction: What is Work Based Learning?

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been encouraged to engage in work-based learning as part of a European wide initiative on lifelong learning for economic buoyancy and social cohesion (Nottingham, 2016). Within the UK, this can be traced back to as early as the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and the Robbins report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) which focused on 'work-readiness' of graduates. Work-based Learning (WBL) can be defined as learning within higher education that is derived from undertaking paid or voluntary work (Garnett, 1997) which provides the opportunity to enhance employability (Lowden et al. 2011). It plays an essential role in 'meeting the demand for reskilling and upskilling the workforce' (Nixon et al, 2006) and is recognised as a means to bridge the gap between employers and students, as well as contribute to widening participation. It is an opportunity for students to take control of their own learning and focus on areas that are immediately relevant to their career development.

Work based learning is beneficial for less advantaged students (Pennington et al, 2013) as it provides a 'landscape of practice' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) where students are able to test their ideas (Wilton, 2012) and develop their professional identities and sense of employability (Yorke and Knight, 2006). The constructivist underpinning allows students to use their own career experience as vital learning opportunities (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996) and the students recognise the placements as a means to enhance their CVs. The placements also solve the issue of 'no experience, no job' (Roberts et al. 2017) that is often a barrier for students who are unable to take on long-term unpaid placements which leaves some financially disadvantaged students unable to pursue particular roles (Curiale, 2010).

There are a range of different approaches and perspectives to WBL, two of which are summarised in table 1 below. Nottingham's (2016) perspectives reflect pedagogical approaches that inform practice, while Gray's (2011) categories are focused on learning for, through and at work. No particular model has been identified as the 'best' approach (Pegg et al. 2012). However, what is clear from research is that the focus on skills and attributes within WBL is successful when students take control of their learning by evaluation and reflection (viz Education for Social Justice Framework [ESJF] 2019).

Context

Within Psychology at London Met, WBL runs at level 5 and as a year-long module. The teaching takes place in the first term and the placement takes place in the second. However, currently, there is no time allocated to students within their timetable for the placement to be carried out as the teaching slot in term 2 is replaced by another core module. This makes it difficult for students to allocate time to a placement as a lot of students at London Met work when they are not scheduled to be in lectures.

In more detail, the current approach to WBL within London Met Psychology is what Major (2016) described as the individual approach where learning is facilitated by a tutor while enrolled on a module, in line with Gray's (2001) 'learning for work' and Nottingham's 'disciple centred' approach (table 1). Students attend sessions for 12 weeks which are based on graduate attributes, attitudes and skills development with reference to psychology. The module provides a space where the students are able to identify their career paths and develop their own career choices. Students have two assignments for this module. A portfolio which consists of four tasks: a tailored CV for a specific job; a statement of 'fit for role' where students are expected to align and evidence their skills, strengths, attributes and attitudes to a specific job; a critical discussion on how the student has developed a positive digital footprint using LinkedIn; and an infographic displaying their 5-year career plan from the year of graduation. The portfolio is due at the end of the teaching term. Following this, students start their placement which is self-sourced and in-line with their career goals. A learning agreement is to be approved by the learner, the work placement provider and the tutor. This agreement outlines learning outcomes and goals the learner hopes to achieve by the end of the placement. A reflective report is produced at the end of the placement which is written using a model of reflection and focuses on ethics in the workplace, as well as elements from the learning agreement, such as what goals have been achieved and an action plan for the future.

Table 1: Models of Work Based Learning

Nottingham (2016)	(Gray 2011)
<p>Discipline – centred</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pedagogy remains focused within discipline. ● Professional areas of expertise form a large part of the curriculum. ● Mentors play a significant role in assessing competencies within the workplace. 	<p>Learning for work (placements)</p> <p>Learning for work refers to placement opportunities through HEIs such as the well-established sandwich-courses or work placement modules where students spend a set period of time in industry to gain experience and observe their theoretical knowledge in the working environment while also being assessed as part of their university degree.</p>
<p>Learner-centred</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pedagogy is distinctive from discipline. ● Learning outcomes are 'generic' experiential learning outcomes. 	<p>Learning at work (company in house training)</p> <p>On-site company training schemes that provide the opportunity for companies to upskill their existing workforce without sending their staff away for long periods of time</p>

Nottingham (2016)	(Gray 2011)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplace knowledge acquisition is viewed as interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary. 	
<p>Employer-centred</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer is the focal point for curriculum design for workforce development. Facilitation style is mainly co-creation and client focused. WBL is seen as a valuable resource for knowledge exchange and useful for building interaction between students, academics and HE institutions. 	<p>Learning through work (linked to formal accreditation)</p> <p>On-site training similar to that of learning at work, however, this training is formally assessed and accredited. This can take the form of day release programmes that are linked to HEIs</p>

Rationale

At London Met, within our commitment to social inclusion, we are working towards our students being agents of change through what and how they learn (ESJF, 2019; Boliver & Wakeling, 2017). With that, the aim of this paper is to explore current approaches and applications of WBL within HEIs in order to contribute to evidence-based practise, increase focus on the development of social justice, improve employment outcomes for students and develop successful lifelong learners.

Why is Work Based Working important?

The development of reflective practice through WBL enables students to become more employable as their skills and knowledge become more relevant to their career goals (Huq and Gilbert, 2013). This is particularly true if the WBL pedagogy is distinct from the academic discipline which allows the academics and employers to shape learning around the student's individual needs and goals. The distinction is often important if the discipline is esoteric rather than vocational, just as psychology is because there is sometimes no relationship between the graduate attributes required for a graduate job and the educational learning outcomes (Fowles-Sweet & Barker, 2018). Although recent changes in London Met Psychology have included learning objectives in modules which relate to employment and career outcomes.

In regards to a social justice perspective, WBL provides work experience opportunities that may not have been available otherwise. 26.5% of graduate positions are filled by graduates who have previously worked for the same employer through placements or internships. As many of these experiences are often unpaid, there is limited access to them by financially disadvantaged students (Macmillian and Vignoles, 2013). This highlights the importance of students being given appropriate amounts of time to complete placements while at university and the importance of these opportunities being supported by the career services.

Research suggests that disadvantaged students are less likely to use the career service at university and instead, rely on informal contacts (Simpson, 2013). For this reason, WBL is important as a bridge between the students and the university's career service. Building the career service support into the WBL module is a useful way of developing the students' career planning and this benefits their lifelong learning (Roberts et al. 2017).

Teaching and Learning approaches to Work Based Learning

Unlike traditional teaching and learning in HEIs, work-based learning develops knowledge that can be applied directly to practice. Learning within WBL can occur through experiential, practice-oriented learning and reflection. Experiential learning is the active process by which a learner reflects and critically reviews their experiences (Boud et al., 2006; Schon, 1987). In addition to this, experiential learning can take a constructivist approach whereby learners critically reflect on problem-based learning (PBL) which can be facilitated as independent or group, F2F or online activity. PBL is appropriate in facilitating experiential learning as it is specific and has clear goals for both the individual and the team (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Experiential learning challenges the idea that theory can be learnt without personal experience to make sense of it (Hodkinson et al. 2008).

Learning from past experiences is only possible if learners are able to understand how they construct their knowledge and practises. This is where reflection is useful (Boud et al. 2006; Schon, 1987). Within WBL, reflection is used to articulate learning and understanding, which is used to develop critically informed practises. Reflection is also useful in terms of team relations in that it provides an ethical framework whereby the actions and assumptions of others can be explored rather than taking a judgmental mind-set. Reflective questioning is a key strategy for developing self-awareness and criticality (Heron, 1999). This is one way in which the teaching of general ethics can be brought in.

Research suggests that learning is more likely to carry from one context to another if the contexts are similar (Tennant, 1999). Therefore, it is important that the learning process within HEIs are applicable to the workplace so that the learning can be replicated once placements start. There are several ways in which this sort of learning can be facilitated. Creating roles and responsibilities within simulations in the learning environment that replicate the work environment may be one way to do this. Another is to create a 'client' for the work that needs to be done to imitate in-house companies or live-projects (Reich et al., 2015).

Siebert, Mills and Tuff (2009) suggest that most of the literature on WBL advocates for an individualised approach to learning with an open line of communication between the HEI and the employer. This communication is essential in developing the learning outcomes and meeting the requirements of the employer.

Practical implications of Psychology Work Based Learning at London Met

Within the context of Psychology at London Met, using a 'learning for work' (Gray, 2011) approach, with a learner centred pedagogy (Nottingham, 2016) is beneficial in maximising the student's employability outcomes as outlined previously. However, allocating time for the students to go on placements would benefit those who are unable to give up personal time for unpaid placements.

Asynchronous lecture material and activities should be considered to provide the students the time to complete placements during the allocated lecture time. One to one appointment with tutors, employers and London Met career consultants would be useful in monitoring engagement and development.

While the career service is currently involved in facilitating some key lectures on CV writing and career planning, this can be taken further to facilitate the relationship between the students and the service. Within the developmental workshops the online services such as self-assessment tools, CV and cover letter building and the skill development courses can be utilised to further integrate the career service into the module. This will come together to form the 'wrap-around' support that Roberts et al (2017) found to be beneficial for student's career development and social justice.

The assessments, both the portfolio and the work-based reflection, provide the opportunity for students to reflect on their own identities, experiences and cultural capital. With multiple feedback cycles, the students gain confidence and self-efficacy in regards to their employability skills.

Conclusion

Although there are different approaches and applications to work-based learning, there is no specific way deemed the 'best'. The best fit is arguably dependent on the discipline, the institution and most importantly, the student body. In the case of Psychology at London Met, the correct application will 'align with principles of equity, with who our students are and the challenges facing London and its communities' (ESJF, 2019). It will provide an opportunity for our students to reach their full potential in an environment that facilitates social justice, so they are able to go on to successful careers and be that positive change for both themselves and their communities.

References

- Boliver, V., & Wakeling, P., (2017) social justice and Higher Education. *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions* (pp. 1-6) DOI:[10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_43-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_43-1)
- Boud, D., Cressey, P. and Docherty, P. (2006) *Productive Reflection at work*. Routledge.
- Committee on Higher Education (1963) Higher education (Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–1963). London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office
- Curiale, J. (2010) America's new glass ceiling: unpaid internships, the fair labour standards act, and the urgent need for change, *Hastings law journal*, 61: 101- 127
- [Education for Social Justice Framework](#), 2019
- Fowles-Sweet, W. & Barker, J. (2018) Widening Participation and social justice Encompassing and Integrating Learning Opportunities. *Widening Participation and Lifelong learning*. 20(2): 69-95
- Garnett, J. (1997) Quality Assurance in Work Based Learning. In: UACE work based learning network conference, 1997
- Gray, D. (2001) *A Briefing on Work-Based Learning*. York: Learning and Teaching.
- Heron, J., (1999) *The complete Facilitator's Handbook*. Kogan Page.
- Hmelo-Silver, C. (2004) 'Problem Based learning: What and how do students learn?', *Educational Psychology Review*, 16(3): 235-66

- Hodkinson, P., Biesta, G. and Thorpe, M. (2008) 'Understanding learning culturally: Overcoming the dualism between social and individual views of learning', *Vocations and Learning*, 1: 27-47
- Hug, A. and Gilbert, D.H. (2013) 'Enhancing Graduate Employability Through Work-Based Learning in Social Entrepreneurship: A Case Study', *Education + Training*, 55, 6: 550-572.
- Lowden, K., Hall, S., Ellio, D. D., & Lewin, J. (2011). Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. London: Edge Foundation.
- Macmillan, M., Tyler, C. & Vignoles, A. (2013) Who gets the top jobs? The role of family background and networks in recent graduates' access to high status professions. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44 (3): 483–515, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279414000634>
- Major, D. (2016) Models of work-based learning, examples and reflections. *Journal of work-applied management*. 8 (1) 17-28.
- Mitchell, L.K. & Krumboltz, J.D. (1996) Krumboltz's Learning Theory of Career Choice and Development, in Brown, D., Brooks, L. & associates (eds.), *Career choice and development* (third edition), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nottingham, P. (2016) The use of work-based learning pedagogical perspectives to inform flexible practice within higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 21(7) 790-806
- NCIHE (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education) (1997) *Higher education in the learning society*. Norwich: HMSO.
- Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S. and Lawton, R. (2012) *Pedagogy for employability*. Routledge Falmer
- Pennington, M., Mosley, E. & Sinclair, R. (2013) AGCAS/ AGR Graduate success project: an investigation of graduate transitions, social justice and the HEAR, AGCAS/BIS, Sheffield: AGCAS
- Reich, A., Rooney, D. and Boud, D. (2015) 'Dilemmas in continuing professional learning; Learning inscribed in frameworks or elicited from practice', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 37 (2): 131-41
- Roberts, R. Brammar, L. & Cobb, F. (2017) Experiential work-based learning as a social mobility mechanism for widening participation students. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*. 38 (1) : 44-51
- Schon, D., (1987) *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Jossey-Bass
- Siebert, S., Mills, V., & Tuff, C. (2009). Pedagogy of work-based learning: The role of the learning group. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 21(6), 443–454
- Simpson, A. (2013) Location, timing, and flexibility: positioning inclusivity in higher education career services. *Australian journal of career development*, 22 (1): 45-48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416213478806>
- Tennant, M. (1999) *'Is learning transferable?'* *Understanding Learning at work*. Routledge
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) Learning in a landscape of practice in Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O'Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiack, C. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (eds) *Learning in landscapes of practice. Boundaries, identity, and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*, Oxford: Routledge.
- Wilton, N. (2012). The impact of work placements on skills development and career outcomes for business and management graduates, *Studies in higher education*, 37(5): 603-620, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.532548>
- Yorke, M., & Knight, P. (2006) *Embedding employability into the curriculum* (Vol. 3), York: Higher Education Academy

Biographical note

Olaide Phillips is a Principal Lecturer in Psychology at London Met and leads the work-based learning module within psychology.

O.phillips@londonmet.ac.uk