Empowering students through mentoring, learning and reflective portfolios

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Abstract:

This paper describes some of the issues raised by a higher education institution (HEI) in implementing systems to empower students in programmes developed in partnership with industry. As organizations focus on economic indicators and return on investment their approaches to learning and development opportunities must be effective and efficient. The resulting award or qualification can be developed to structure the acquisition of knowledge skills and competence in a blended approach valuing the workplace itself as a centre for learning. The challenge for the higher education provider is in equipping students with the supports and skills necessary to identify, translate and document their work place learning for academic accreditation. This case study looks at such an engagement and how mentoring, learning and reflective portfolios can empower students/workers to develop skills in documenting their learning relevant to workplace competencies identified in partnership with the work organization.

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1 Introduction

In the past number of years there have been changes in approach at a national and international level in how programs are devised, delivered and supported. There has been a significant shift in thinking on what learning is valued, coupled with where and how learning can be achieved. There is also an increased emphasis on professionalism within the enterprise domain and the need for on-going support for the acquisition of skills and competencies to ensure growth and sustainability within a competitive global marketplace. This can be achieved by working in a close partnership with a higher education institution (HEI) to develop customized learning pathways that are sensitive both to the learner profile and existing skill set and are informed by the unfolding organizational needs.

In recent years there has been a ‘paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching, to a focus on learning.’ (Barr & Tagg 1995). The constant tension between the pressure by academia to maintain the way they would have always done things and the newer demands of students to have an understanding of the application of their learning rather than knowledge alone. There is increasingly a demand for student centered programmes which focus on developing the learners rather than solely delivering education and assessment.

The national strategy for Higher Education to 2030 published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011 identified ‘higher education as a mechanism to make Ireland a country recognized for innovation, competitive enterprise and continued academic excellence.’ The national strategy for Higher Education outlined several areas which would require change and attention including;

(Group, 2011).
- Engagement with the community
- Changes in teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Quality assurance systems

In terms of the National strategy report there is increased focus on educational institutions and how they need to change in terms of ‘autonomy, collaboration, to become outward facing and fully accountable for quality and efficiency outcomes.’ (Group, 2011)

This case study relates to how Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) has been responding to these challenges. CIT is a publicly funded higher education provider. It is the largest provider of the network of thirteen Institutes of Technology. The Institute makes its own awards at undergraduate and taught Masters level, under Delegated Authority from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

CIT currently has in the region of 15,000 registered students; approximately 7,000 are registered full-time on third-level programmes, and the remaining part-time students. CIT’s education, research and training provision spans a wide variety of disciplines, from business and humanities through engineering and science to music, drama, art & design and nautical studies.

2 Student centered learning and education

There is increased pressure being placed on HEIs to have the needs of students as a central concern with regard to education and training. This has implications in terms of how programmes are developed, delivered and assessed.

Traditionally, HEIs developed programmes without significant consultation with industry. It was believed by academia that they were the ‘experts’ in the particular field so could decipher the essential elements required to ensure an individual’s competence in an area.

This approach to the development of programmes has dramatically changed and employer groups and organisation's are increasingly consulted and involved in the process from the initial stages. This is done to ensure their relevance to the future skill requirements of industry and that qualifications are relevant and current.

In terms of where programmes are delivered there has also been a paradigm shift in approach where workplaces are becoming centres of learning and that education activities which traditionally were only delivered in education institutions are now delivered in the workplace or in a blended approach between workplace and higher education institution.

2.1 Student empowerment and motivation

In order for students to assume ownership of and responsibility for their learning in an academic programme they need to be motivated and empowered to do so. In terms of motivating students who are employees of a company it is important that the reason for part taking in further education is a decision of the employee as opposed to being pressured by the employer. Brophy (2010) stated that ‘students will not respond well to motivational attempts if they are fearful, resentful, or otherwise focused on negative emotions’.

Another aspect of motivation is that students inherently learn better if they are part of a ‘learning community’.

A preferred scenario is the identification by the workplaces of the skill deficiencies of their workforce and putting in place programmes to address these and in doing so use the workplace as a learning environment.
It is the recognition that a workplace is an area where extensive and significant learning can and does take place. It ensures that theoretical learning is fully applied and referred to valid workplace situations making the learning more applicable and relevant. Therefore the area of work-based learning becomes relevant and its application becomes a true reality to address the current and future skill requirements of Irish society.

The workplace is being predominantly seen as a valid learning forum with the emphasis on lifelong, life wide learning. Informal and non-formal learning are primarily linked to work place learning, in the sense that it is through learning by doing that the knowledge, skill and competence is acquired. As defined by Garnett (1997) "work-based learning is learning at higher education level derived from undertaking paid or unpaid work" (Gray 7). Gray also outlined that work-based learning is a “mechanism for learning” (Gray 7). The emphasis of work based learning is that it contributes in some way to the knowledge of the learner. As Gray states work-based learning is learning “at work or for work” (Gray 4).

Learning portfolio

In terms of empowering students, the careful selection of assessment methods can empower the student to more effective demonstrate their learning. The learning portfolio is such a tool.

Annis and Jones (1995) defined student portfolios as ‘a multidimensional, documented collection of …..a … student's work put together in an organised way and including a reflective discussion of the materials contained in the portfolio’. (Zubizarreta 15)

Zubizarreta defined the learning portfolio as 'a flexible, evidence-based tool that engages students in a process of continuous reflection and collaborative analysis of learning. As written text, electronic display, or other creative project, the portfolio captures the scope, richness, and relevance of students' learning. The portfolio focuses on purposefully and collaboratively selected reflections and evidence for both improvement and assessment of students' learning' (Zubizarreta 16).

The learning portfolio is extremely supportive of the development of employees' skills to identify and document their learning relative to particular workplace competencies.

Reflective portfolio

Reflective portfolios are useful within all formal programmes but especially those developed in partnership with the workplace or for programmes such as those with mature students. The reason for this is that the learner is able to put their learning into context and determine whether it truly has relevance outside of academia. It also develops their abilities to determine how their newly acquired learning affects their current work practice. It also empowers them in terms of identifying areas of business processes which should be changed to support best practice.

Mentoring

Mentoring is defined by Dunn et al as;
“The process based on a partnership between two individuals within a context where the mentor shares his or her professional and personal expertise with another for mutual benefit. Mentoring relationships are characterised by a degree of uniqueness, not only across disciplines but also on a case-by-case basis. “(Dunn, Morgan and O'Reilly 96)

Mentor support and guidance is paramount in the completion of a learning portfolio. Support and encouragement is required by the learner to identify the relevant learning which they should input into their portfolio. In the case of an individual with informal and non-formal
learning, who has not been involved in education and training a mentor will be a vital resource which they will require.

The initial task for a mentor in working with individuals with informal and non-formal learning will be to help them realise the level of learning that they have accomplished.

In the experience of the author, learners who have had limited experience of higher education seldom have an appreciation of the extent of their learning. The primary reason for this is that their learning is seen by them as 'just what they do' on a day to day basis. In relation to formal recognition of their learning, they do not contextualise their informal and non-formal learning in this manner. Therefore, difficulty can arise in establishing linkages between what they have acquired informally and what is required formally by education institutions and awarding bodies.

The mentor should possess knowledge of what is required in order for them to be useful to a learner. It is necessary that in the case of a portfolio, the mentor is knowledgeable as to the content of a portfolio and what the learner is required to input. Ideally, the mentor should be someone who is not a friend or close colleague of the learner. In the experience of the author the most effective mentors for work-based learning programmes are supervisors or managers of the learner. They are readily aware of the tasks performed by the learner and the informal and non-formal learning they have acquired. It is not necessary that a mentor be available in a work place. An academic mentor can also be assigned to assist a learner in the compilation of their learning portfolio. The academic mentor will not possess the same level of insight into the learning of a person with informal and non-formal learning. This should not inhibit the learner, as a portfolio is essentially a representation of their learning and not that of the mentors.

There are an increasing number of workplaces who are realising the benefit of having trained mentors on hand to assist those with informal and non-formal learning to access education and training.

3 Learning Environment Changes

As a result of the increased involvement by industry at all stages of academic programmes from development through to assessment the traditional relationship between the student and the HEI has now evolved into a tri-partite arrangement with the workplace also featuring strongly in the dynamic.

External to this partnership are macro forces which drive the local, regional and national learning partnership interaction priorities.
4 Case studies of student empowerment

The following are two case studies which demonstrate an approach to empowering students in terms of

- Co-creators of knowledge
- To become reflective practitioners
- In part responsible for their own learning journey
- Developing relevant, reusable, transferable skills
- Linking education with the needs of the workplace. They are more closely linked

4.1 Case Study 1 Print Media Industry

In the first engagement the company was from the print media industry. They had offices located nationally with the responsibility for 14 titles. Their portfolio was quite diverse in terms of the business function, some had been developed by themselves and others were acquired by the group.

As the group was expanding they identified a need for the up-skilling of their employees in the sales and marketing division. Traditionally, it was an area which attracted people with an interest in sales but not necessarily the knowledge and skills required to become effective sales people. The employer organisation realized that having a knowledgeable sales force could be a source of competitive advantage for them in an industry which was extremely competitive in terms of securing advertising income. The company had become a training provider under the national authority but they were not an educational provider so they required an external partner to deliver the educational aspect of the course.

Programme structure

The course was a one year add on degree in sales at a level seven on the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) and level six on the European qualification framework (EQF). In order to be accepted onto the course the applicant was required to have a level six qualification or equivalent learning.

The programme consisted of 60 credits of learning, incorporating a variety of modules focused on the theoretical underpinnings of sales and marketing. There was a professional development in the workplace module which was worth 10 credits (ECTS) of learning. This module was developed in conjunction with the workplace in terms of identifying the
workplace competencies which they needed employees to possess to be effective within their role. The skills were generic in terms of their relevance to any sales situation and not specific to the processes of the company. The workplace competencies became the indicative content, which informed the learning outcomes of the module.

The students were full time employees of the company and they were released on a monthly basis to attend lecture and network/collaborate with other employees. The content of the professional development module focused on developing reflective learners who could identify their own learning. The intention of the module was that the employees could become better at their roles or identify gaps in their learning which needed to be rectified.

The module was delivered by a module lecturer in CIT who focused on the skills of documenting and evidencing learning, reflective practice and the ability to identify gaps in their learning and take steps to rectify that position. Each employee also had a mentor assigned to them within their own workplaces whose role was to support and guide the learner. The mentor was normally the direct line manager of the employee so there was familiarity with the person before the learning engagement. The mentor had the responsibility of assisting the learner in identifying their relevant learning from the workplace. If the employee identified that they did not possess all of the 10 workplace competencies then the mentor had the responsibility of ensuring the employee got the opportunity to gain that learning.

The mentors were trained by the CIT lecturer in mentoring, the role of mentors and supports which could be used by them to enhance the interaction with the mentee. The mentors within the work environment were able to refer back to the CIT module lecturer/mentor if necessary so they were continuously supported within their role.

The methods used to capture the learning were learning and reflective portfolios. The assessment methods used had to be flexible and appropriate in facilitating an employee to document their learning and support it with suitable evidence. The learning portfolio also allowed for the individual nuances as no two employees had the same learning. The reflective portfolio also supported the individual learner and provided flexibility for the employee to document their experience in a manner which suited them. It also provided an opportunity for them to identify how the other modules of the course would inform their practice going forward for the betterment of the individual, their role and the organization.

**Empowerment**

In terms of empowering students to engage with education and training it was possible for employees to gain entry using their prior work based learning if they didn’t have the prerequisite formal qualification. Prior to this engagement some of the employees hadn’t completed any higher education qualifications. The programme increased their confidence in their own abilities in terms of its equivalence with academic qualification standards.

As the reflective portfolios were retained by CIT and not disclosed to the employer the employees were provided with a confidential space to be critical of the workplace and make recommendations which they may otherwise be fearful of mentioning.

The feedback received from management and employees was extremely positive in terms of using their learning. Management reflected that employees became more engaged in sales efforts, more proactive in terms of business development, understanding motivations of clients and developing effective strategies to talk to people in a way which they were understood and received well. Management saw that the course was providing a very real competitive advantage to the business group.
Overall for the company group there was evidence of improvements in motivation and levels of professionalism as employees went through the programme. They were more organized and more effective in ways of working both with clients, self-motivation and inspiring colleagues around them. Employees’ abilities to deal with clients at all levels improved especially with internal clients.

The employees also found that opportunities arose within the company in terms of promotion or greater responsibility. In the case of other employees who completed the course, the identification and documenting of their skills in the area gave them greater confidence in their abilities and to engage further with higher education.

4.2 Case Study 2 Irish Naval Service

The second engagement was with the Irish Naval service (INS) which was different from the first engagement in a number of ways.

The engagement for this programme emerged from successful interactions between CIT and the Irish Naval Service for more than 30 years. There was considerable investment made by the employer in terms of training of a mentor network which consisted of mentors, assessors and mentees. This ensured that all were aware of their responsibilities under the programme. In terms of development of the programme the employer specified their content requirements and worked with the academic staff in terms of identifying the associated relevant workplace competencies.

In this engagement the involvement of the workplace was more extensive in terms of the number of modules involved and also the responsibilities assumed by the workplace.

The programme in question was already developed prior to the involvement of the Irish Naval service. In order to meet their learning requirements, a separate stream was developed in the final year of the programme for the INS personnel. Due to the nature of the business which the Naval service are in, employees were unable to be absent from their appointed ships for extended periods of time. Therefore the modules were completed in the workplace by the employees with support from a designated mentor and CIT lecturer.

Assessment

The INS was also responsible for the assessment of the material produced as it related to sensitive material related to national security and other naval specific material. The assessments and naval assessors were subject to CIT’s qualification and quality assurance standards and were processed with all other student results at the end of semester examinations.

In terms of developing understanding of the structure of the programme by the employees there were workshops on portfolio development and critical reflection to ensure they understood the appropriate processes and boundaries for the successful completion of the Work Based Learning (WBL) elements of the course.

Significant learning arising from the engagement

In terms of the programme and the approach taken in terms of a partnership approach and integrating the requirements of the organisation into the programme content it was key to the success of the programme in the opinion of management.

In relation to the more traditional approach to training and development of the Navy they felt that they are very skills focused and no value was put on the academic value of the learning acquired within the workplace. In terms of programme design and development academic staff and CIT staff were to open to understand the variances between the cultures of the two...
organisations. It was evident by the Navy that academic staff placed a worth on the training which their trainees engaged in. In terms of the approach adopted by CIT in their programme development they integrated the needs of the Navy into the programme and module learning outcomes. The same quality assurance procedures were adopted for the programme so it was seen as on par with any other academic module/programme in the institute, nationally or internationally.

The programme also influenced the internal development of training within the Navy. There was a change of approach in how their training was structured in that it was pegged against the levels 6 – 9 on the national framework of qualifications. The fact that all training is placed on the framework means that it can be easily referenced onto the European Qualification framework or any other national framework. This facilitates the EU agenda of the mobility and transfer of learning and learners across boundaries.

5. Conclusions
5.1 Why these engagements worked
The reasons why these engagements were so successful were as a result of several factors. The employer organizations had decided what they wanted their workplaces to be separate to this engagement. In the case of the Irish Naval Service they had developed their own vision to become ‘the smartest, most innovative and efficient Naval service in the world by 2016’. They aspire to being a learning and knowledge institution. The partnership between Irish Naval service and Cork Institute of Technology is seen as one of the core strategic pillars of the naval service ‘transformation’ agenda. In the case of the Irish media company they had decided that they would develop a world class sales force which would be their competitive advantage in a very competitive market place.

Mentoring is seen as pivotal to the success of the programme. Both workplaces implemented mentor networks to support the employees completing the course. In the case of both workplaces, the challenge was that they already had workplace mentoring systems which are not fit for purpose for learning and development purposes. In the Navy the military style mentoring system wasn’t conducive to encouraging critical reflection and identification of gaps in learning. They showed their commitment to the programme by investing in continuous training and development for their mentors.

One of the major contributors to the success of these programmes was the assessment tools used to capture the learning of the employees. Traditional assessment methods were realized as not being appropriate in facilitating the development of the employees and their learning. They were all provided with a template to use for both the learning and reflective portfolios so the employees did not have to be concerned with the structure.

All parties were committed to the engagement. The employer organizations, the employees and CIT made significant investment in terms of time, financial but mentally committed to the success of the programme.

5.2 Empowering the students /employees
The structure of the programme enhanced the students’ ability to become reflective practitioners. These skills stemmed beyond academic achievements and into their daily working lives.

An outcome of this approach was the student felt empowered to ask ‘why’ as opposed to accepting the status quo. This was especially relevant within the naval service as they were used to just following orders and never reflecting on whether it was best practice. This approach also encouraged deep rather than surface learning.
The content of the course was directly influenced by workplace competencies so it had benefits for them beyond academic credit. It provided them with opportunities to develop their occupational potential.

The programmes increased self-confidence in their abilities as sales people or young naval officers.

Feedback was received from management following the engagements that they saw improvements in other skills outside of the work place competencies. These improvements related to areas such as their analytical, writing and other generic skills which they got through the programme.

5.3 Enablers and challenges of the engagements

Though the case studies demonstrate the different workplaces with diverse workplace cultures and purpose there were several commonalities which enabled these engagements. These included but aren't limited to the following;

- Employers were very engaged with the process and in the development of a programme which met the workplaces and employees short term and long term goals.
- There was considerable flexibility in the programmes in terms of assessment and student support whilst maintaining academic standards.
- In terms of programme content, consideration was given to the needs of employees to develop current and future skills. There was a focus on the academic and professional needs of employees. There was also encouragement through the programme for learners to take ownership for demonstrating their learning and knowledge in an area and identifying where they have potential for the future.
- The development of a mentor network within the workplace was a significant enabler as the workplace became a centre for learning.
- There was a willingness to share and learn within the partnership which was structured in a tri-partite arrangement.

The challenges of the engagement included the following;

- The diversity in the organisation cultures posed challenges in terms of how each organisation approached the collaboration.
- Resistance to change from CIT course development personnel in terms of syllabus development, delivery and assessment.
- In the instance of the Irish Naval Service engagement the assessment material had to be assessed by military personnel due to the sensitive nature of the content. This posed new challenges to the higher education institution as they traditionally would assess all material.
- Mentoring systems for educational purposes were challenging as an informal system already existed. Mentors found it difficult to separate their roles as occupational and academic mentors.

Bibliography


