Reflections on work and learning
and flexible curriculum
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Abstract

In this paper we reflect on the curriculum implications of some recent initiatives undertaken by The Open University in Scotland (OUiS). The University has traditionally delivered a flexible curriculum aimed at a part-time student population who are predominantly in work. More recently there has been a development of work-based learning (WBL) qualifications across a range of different discipline areas. We consider examples of workplace learning initiatives that have made use of both more traditional curriculum and curriculum designed specifically as WBL. We also consider examples of the impact of the growth of the curriculum through the development of non-accredited Open Educational Resources. In reflecting on some representative examples we look at how a Higher Education (HE) curriculum, whether conventional or work-based, can intersect and interact with work experience. In the course of this we share a “rich picture” developed to help us conceptualise work and learning.

1. Introduction

Developed economies face demographic challenges. The workforce is ageing; the majority of people who will be in work in 2020 (70%) have already left education (Leitch 2006). The skills required within the economy are changing, and the recession continues and as older workers remain in the labour market for economic reasons (and young unemployment increases) (Goodwin and O’Connor 2012), so the role of Higher Education changes. Following Leitch, HE providers have been encouraged to engage much more clearly with economic productivity. Despite a relatively high investment in the production of skills in Scotland labour productivity lags behind other developed economies (Scottish Government 2007). Within this policy focus there is recognition that economic productivity is not simply a supply issue, but also a demand issue, and that employers may be under-utilising the skills present within the workforce. The move from simply supplying graduates, to engaging more directly with employees and employers, in particular about how to use existing and newly developed skills, what might be called ‘workforce development’, lies at the centre of the OU in Scotland’s engagement with work and learning.

The OUiS has a distinctive role in the Scottish sector as the largest provider of part-time HE. The curriculum is flexible, modular and credit based. Nearly three-quarters of the 16,000 students are in work and the majority say that they are studying either to improve their skills, to progress in their career or to make a change of career direction (Cannell and Caddell, 2012). The OUiS is part of a much larger institution, the UK Open University which supports over 200,000 students across the four nations of the UK and internationally. The OU’s pedagogic model, ‘Supported Open Learning’, allows students to study high quality, interactive learning materials while supported by a personal tutor who provides academic support and feedback on assessment. The curriculum is developed centrally by teams of academics and learning technologists on a Fordist model that expects and affords large-scale delivery, and provides a consistent student experience irrespective of the student’s location. Although online forums and optional face-to-face tutorials provide opportunities for interaction with other students the model is essentially one of individual support. Underpinning learning design and pedagogy across the curriculum is an assumption that adult learners bring knowledge and skills to their studies that should be valued and respected.
The last decade has seen two important curriculum developments; firstly, the development of work-based modules and qualifications and secondly a huge growth in the development of non-accredited Open Educational Resources (OERs). Each of these developments has impacted on, and helped to shape, some of our practice and our understanding of the relationship between work and learning.

WBL curriculum in the OU conforms with our general Supported Open Learning model but can be distinguished in the way it requires students to be able to actively engage in, and reflect on, particular kinds of work-based experience. The workplace is not just part of the individual’s lived experience, but part of the study environment. Critically then it might be expected that WBL students on a given module share common experiences. The growth of explicitly WBL curriculum in the OU is rooted in two related phenomena. The first chronologically is a response to regulation and the requirements of professional bodies and was initially located primarily, but not exclusively, in the Health and Social Care sectors. The second was prompted by an initiative of the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in 2000, which called for the development of Foundation Degrees (FDs) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The aims of this new qualification were to provide graduates with the skills needed to address shortages in particular sectors and to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who might not previously have considered studying for a higher-level qualification. The design principles for these new qualifications are intended to ensure that they are work-based qualifications. In the OU’s case these two hundred and forty credit point degrees must include 50% of the credit achieved through work-based modules. The Open University now offers the Foundation degree (FD) in a range of subject areas. In Scotland the OU badges these work-based qualifications as Diplomas in Higher Education (Dip HE). There are some parallels between the role of FDs and Scottish Higher National Awards and also some significant differences (Reeve et al, 2007). There are also variations between institutions in the way that WBL in FDs is construed.

The other development that informs thinking in this paper is the rapid growth of OERs, which began in 2001 when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology launched OpenCourseWare. OERs are defined by the OECD (2007: 10) as:

‘… digitised materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research’

The OU’s OER platform OpenLearn was launched in 2006 with the development supported by the Hewlett Foundation1. The ready availability of free, easily accessible learning resources adds a new dimension to the curriculum and opens up possibilities for redefining relationships between universities, learners and, in the context of this paper, learning and work.

In §2 we look at three case studies, which illustrate different aspects of our experience in developing approaches to work and learning. Then in §3 we draw this, and other, experience together in a suggested model to conceptualise work and learning. Finally in §4 we draw some tentative conclusions and consider what the implications are for curriculum development in the next decade.

2. Case studies

2.1 Developing the use of better skills in the care sector

1 http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education-program/open-educational-resources/
Our first case study is based on an initiative supported by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and linked to the Scottish Government’s interest in skills utilisation (Scottish Government, 2007). Supervisors in care settings who have responsibilities to manage staff are required by the Scottish Social Services Council to gain a professional qualification (usually SVQ level 3) and a supervisory or management qualification that provides a minimum of 15 credits at SVQ level 7 or above. Typically the care workers who require this accreditation have little post school education and no HE experience. The project team made the decision to make use of an existing Management module (B121, 30 credits at SCQF level 7), written with an explicit WBL focus, with groups of care workers in both public and private sector workplaces. Goldman (2012) in the final report to the SFC explains that the project approach

‘… seeks to better motivate the learners through developing a supportive workplace learning culture including a shared understanding of the contribution made by learner and organisation, the benefits of the learning to the workplace and finally through the development of peer support.

The pedagogical model has reflective practice at its heart which we suggest has further encouraged motivation and consideration of skill use.’

Findlay and Warhurst (2012), in an overview of the Skills Utilisation Projects, note also that:

‘… in conceptual terms this project […] focused on the use of better skills rather than the better use of skills.’

In the context of this paper it is important to note that B121 was part of existing WBL curriculum and that no modifications were made to the mainstream OU delivery model. However, it was possible to assign personal tutors with a health and social care background and, through several presentations of the module, contextual materials were produced to enhance the mainstream materials that any student in the UK receives. The project was a success with excellent outcomes for students from 12 cohorts across five different workplaces. Evaluation reports (Payne 2011, Goldman 2012) highlight a number of important factors that contributed to rates of completion and attainment that are significantly higher than the norm for the module. Critically, while the module was not in any way bespoke, the context of a workplace group and the relationship between tutors, students and line managers that was developed in the project as an enhancement to the mainstream OU Supported Open Learning model meant that there was a powerful sense of ‘bottom up’ contextualisation for the specific circumstances of the Scottish care sector and for each workplace. One of the module tutors, quoted in Goldman (2012), remarks that

‘Before they started each assignment we would discuss how it was related to their role that they presently carry out, this helped them apply the theory to practice.’

In the SFC commissioned evaluation of all the skills utilisation projects, Payne (2011) comments that:

‘The strength of this project has been in the way it has sought to engage line managers in discussion around how students’ leaning on the B121 can be put to effective use within their everyday working life. The project started with a quite traditional focus on course delivery, but has developed over time and has influenced thinking within parts of the OU about how courses targeted at the workplace can be best delivered.’

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Thus there was development at the level of the cohort and the workplace but also evidence that this then fed back into future curriculum development.

‘There is evidence that some project teams, such as the OU social care project, have developed their understanding over time, and that this has now begun to stimulate discussions within the OU in terms of how it might deliver work-based learning programmes in the future.’ (Payne, 2011)

Goldman in the final report reflects that:

‘… workplace delivery of the tuition and support has kept a strong focus on the application of learning to the workplace. The use of reflective practice throughout the learning has enabled students to better understand the relevance of the learning to their practice as supervisors. Furthermore, the pedagogy has encouraged the development of a workplace peer support process including mentoring through line managers. This has been important to getting application of the learning in the workplace.’

2.2 A partnership approach to higher education in engineering workplaces

This case study shares with our previous example its genesis in the SFC’s skills utilisation projects. It is based on a tripartite relationship between a union, a major engineering employer and the OUis. Since its inception the union has been the primary driver in the partnership – a model that is more common in Scandinavia and elsewhere than in the UK. 

The students are shop floor workers with high levels of practical skills acquired through work, but with HE experience usually restricted to, at most, some SCQF level 7 credit achieved as part of an apprenticeship. In the past, with a small number of individual exceptions, opportunities to study at degree level have not normally be available to these workers; and where it has happened it has typically been on a day release rather than workplace model.

Since the inception of the project successive cohorts of workers have embarked on a pathway to a BEng honours degree. Whereas in our first case study the module itself was designed on WBL principles the BEng is not a work-based qualification – although it should be noted students must ‘bookend’ their study with modules that provide the opportunity for reflection on the development of professional practice. In other respects, however, there are strong similarities. Each module is studied on the mainstream OU model. For some modules it’s possible for tutorials to be held in the workplace – however, complex shift patterns mean that not all students can access this optional support. Like the care sector example rates of completion, attainment and progression are very high. Evaluation studies suggest that there are strong parallels between the two examples although the key factors are developed in different ways. There is evidence of strong interactions between practice-based knowledge and the academic knowledge gained through the BEng. Through reflection on experience part of what HE does is to give participants the confidence to articulate and express their views on practice and this then feeds back into the work process. The role of the union is critical. Prior to the development of the degree programme the Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) in the workplace had developed a collective culture of engagement with education through less formal courses at lower levels of the SCQF. This activity, which continues, opens up possibilities, develops confidence and motivation and builds a culture of collective endeavour. The ULRs play a critical role in enhancing the mainstream OU support model and sit outside the normal employee/employer or learner/provider relationships. Along with students who have already embarked on the degree pathway the ULRs play a critical role in encouraging and clarifying commitments for new students. This additional relationship provides a safety net for participants. They note in particular the role that ULRs play when they have some sort of problem, for example issues around funding, or pastoral support relating to the balance of work and study. One of the most important insights that has emerged from this evaluation is that for these high
achieving students workplace study in a collective context with peer support is the norm. For most of them all their experience of learning has been in, through or at work. Again for most of them this is their only experience of HE. None of this is surprising but it requires the university to rethink its assumptions about the way in which students relate to the curriculum in this kind of partnership.

2.3 Collective learning at work – a role for OERs?

The OUIS signed a formal memorandum of understanding with the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) in 2007 and since that time has worked with Scottish Union Learning (SUL) to develop effective and sustainable approaches to HE study in the workplace. Much of this activity has involved the use of accredited modules, in particular short, discipline based access modules designed as a first step to further engagement with HE. In these cases the model is typically like that explained in §§2.1 and 2.2. Evidence from evaluation across a range of workplaces and modules suggests that where frameworks that support peer support are established outcomes for students are very positive. In the rest of this section, however, we would like to discuss a complementary approach, which utilises the rich resources of OERs.

The OU and other HEIs have invested increasing amounts of resource and intellectual capital in the development of free, non-accredited online resources. Arguably sustainable business models for this activity, and an understanding of who engages, (a widening access issue) and how learners engage (effective learning) is less developed. In popular debate information or online content is often conflated with learning and this can in practice act as a barrier to engagement with and utilisation of these resources. Since 2011, in partnership with SUL and individual unions we have piloted the use of OERs in workplace settings. This approach builds on the workplace learning culture engendered by ULRs and the potential for peer support inherent in cohorts of learners who share a common workplace identity. The university responds to requests from ULRs and delivers a limited amount of face-to-face tuition in the workplace. Typically the face-to-face activity is based on already existing online resources. The tutor role is to listen to the workplace need, select appropriately from the available resources, support the group to become self-sustaining and signpost opportunities to move, if appropriate, from an informal and non-accredited mode of study to more formal engagement with HE.

3. Conceptualising work and learning

Nixon et al (2006) in a Higher Education Academy review of work-based learning note that:

‘Everyone has a view on what work-based learning means and they use a wide range of terms interchangeably (e.g. work-place learning, work-related learning, vocational learning).’

The case studies considered in §2 are selected from a larger set of examples of developing practice in work-based learning which, we have been engaged with as part of a small team at the OUIS. The team meets regularly to review progress and reflect on what has been learned. The quote from Nixon et al (2006) defines an issue we grapple with on a regular basis. The initiatives we have undertaken have all engaged with groups in the workplace. For some participants, studying OU material in the workplace follows prior exposure to HE study at college or university; for most it is a first experience. Examples range from the highly contextual and vocationally relevant such as 2.1 and 2.2, through to examples of study that are less directly related to the workplace and at the other extreme study, which on the face of it is not relevant to the everyday work roles of the participants. Only some of our
practice involves modules that are explicitly badged as WBL and yet evaluation across the range of initiatives suggest that collective study in the workplace supports both the individual aspirations of group members but also has significant impact on skills and motivation in the workplace. Our examples lie in the terrain of work-based learning but don’t fit neatly into the definitions that are in use. To clarify our ideas we have drawn on the “rich pictures” approach to visualising complex problems. “Rich pictures” are a way of thinking about and visualising difficult or complex issues. They are often used at an early stage to record personal or group understanding and interpretation of a particular issue of set of issues (Bell and Morse 2012). Users are encouraged to use pictorial representations rather than text. The approach is useful in group work as the images can reflect and contain ambiguities and lead to useful discussion. In truth people often quickly move from the pictorial to the textual, in particular if it relates to abstract ideas. In a workshop setting the OUiS WBL team created a number of visualisations relating to different aspects of the topic, for example internal OU systems, and after these iterations decided to create a representation of work and learning – see Figure 1.

In the course of debating these issues and reflecting on the results of our practice we have become more comfortable in using the phrase ‘work and learning’ rather than work-based learning. All our examples involve partnership. So students have dual identities as both member of a workplace group and as student. At the heart of each initiative there is a set of shared work and study experience and opportunities to explore this through peer support. At the same time the study materials and the mainstream pedagogy is derived from a curriculum that is delivered in the main to individually supported students. Thinking of work and learning has encouraged us to reflect on the elements of our practice that seem to be important in the context of broader policy debates. Figure 1 is a tentative attempt to capture the important factors involved and the relationships between them. In the model the learner is placed at the centre, surrounded by a “positive and supportive work place culture”, the components of are

- Life Long Learning, an understanding and acceptance that learning takes place throughout ones life in a range of different ways and a range of different locations; An understanding and a commitment to seeing learning in the workplace as a partnership with shared commitments and shared benefits
- An ability to develop new and use existing skills effectively within the workplace to support the employers and employees aspirations;
- An understanding of the economic benefits that accrue to employers, employees and Scottish society from the investment in developing and supporting a culture in the workplace that supports WBL;
- A sound pedagogical base that understands, reflects and articulates the benefits of learning in the workplace, in particular the support of peers and the ability to develop and articulate knowledge and skills within the workplace;
- Content that is relevant to employers and the needs

Much of what the diagram captures is already part of the debate around work-based learning. However, we would want to emphasise that partnership is part of the structure of support, part of the jigsaw, rather than an institutional relationship between employer and university. Peer support is critical and in this respect understanding the boundaries between the academy and the workplace and allow students to lead collectively and individually seems to be very important.
Conclusion

In this final section we return to curriculum issues. In the introduction we noted that from the perspective of society and economy there is a critical need, over the next decade and beyond, for individuals in the workforce to develop new skills and make better use of skills that they have. At the same time there are huge changes in the availability of information and the ability of individuals to access information in new and personal ways. Universities are certainly no longer the privileged gatekeepers to technical knowledge. In these new circumstances this raises questions about what we mean by flexible curriculum. Arguably this discussion needs to go beyond dichotomies of full and part-time and accredited or non-accredited provision. OERs and Massive Open Online Courses both raise questions of who the learners are, how they engage with learning and the nature of the learning. In this paper we have reflected on our experience of working in partnership with unions and employers to promote HE learning in the workplace. We would argue that this experience is distinctive in two respects. Firstly, because in reviewing WBL across the HE sector we have noted a great deal of innovative and valuable practice, the dominant model is bespoke and it’s not clear that its practicable to grow the scale of these approaches to allow Universities to meet socio-economic demands. Indeed at present in terms of money spent, Universities have only a small fraction of the market for education and training in the workplace. In house and private provision dominates and there is considerable evidence that providers are seeking to expand in this area. In contrast to bespoke approaches the partnership approach that we have outlined seeks to maximise the benefits of mainstream curriculum. Our evidence suggests appropriate adult learning pedagogy, space for reflection and collectively organised peer support helps those in the workplace to contextualise mainstream curriculum, and what
emerges is user-generated understanding of learning and the workplace. Secondly, we have argued that potential barriers to accessing rich resources in online formats can be overcome with appropriate support and guidance. We have some limited experience of how working in partnership enables not simply better use of existing OERs but also the possibility of developing rich new resources based on shared knowledge and experience. Again this is a pedagogic issue and we feel there is real scope for further development in theoretical understanding of how social context and studying in socially connected environments can support successful learning. New developments in social media and the ubiquity of communication technology could potentially support such new pedagogy. There is a real need for further research in what we would call Open Educational Practice.

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