

Making Internships Meaningful: The Challenge of Encouraging Reflection and Skills Articulation

Caddell Martha¹, Boyle Fiona⁰, ¹*The Open University in Scotland, UK*, ²*Queen Margaret University, UK*

“We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience” – John Dewey

Introduction

In recent years considerable emphasis has been placed on embedding employability and skills development in core university curriculum content as well as providing additional support and development to enhance links between learning and work (SFC 2004, 2009, Yorke 2006, Pegg et al 2012). A focus on ‘graduate attributes’, for example, highlights a commitment to developing skills and abilities across the curriculum and university experience (Hounsell 2010, Barrie 2007, Dacre Pool & Sewell 2007). But there is a risk that this has become so ‘embedded’ that students struggle to identify, articulate and (re)present the skills and knowledge they have developed at university to employers and others.

This paper draws on critical insights from the *Third Sector Internships Scotland* programme to explore the challenges many students have in articulating skills and experience. Over the past three years the programme has offered over 275 internships, received 6500 applications from students and offered bespoke feedback on 1000+ interviews. The research team have therefore had access to an extensive and unique dataset from which to consider the spectrum of student employability needs across the Scottish sector. Through this lens the paper poses critical questions about how universities can / should best support students to identify and articulate skills development and the tools and resources available to facilitate reflection and communication.

Encouraging Reflection on Work and Learning: Insights from Third Sector Internships Scotland

The importance of reflecting on experience and the development of self-awareness and analytical skills has long been recognised as a key feature of the learning cycle. As Aitchison and Graham note, “We do not learn from experience. Experience has to be arrested, examined, analysed, considered and negotiated in order to shift it to knowledge” Aitchison and Graham cited in Stroobants et al (2007:30). Reflection, while difficult to fully define, involves the ability to stand back from activity and learning experiences, to critically consider actions and, in light of this, make change to future plans and activities (Schon 1983, Rodgers 2002, Gibbs 1988, Kolb 1984). How to support and encourage this and how to transform this into reflective learning and reflective practice remains a key challenge for universities (Farrow 2011, Pedler et al 1991, Yorke & Knight 2004, 2007).

Third Sector Internships Scotland developed a programme of internships in voluntary organisations, charities and social enterprises in order to offer work experience and skills development opportunities for students, promote the third sector as a graduate career option, and enable students to make a valuable contribution to the work of Scotland’s Third Sector. Completing an internship offers students a unique opportunity to apply their skills and learning in a real world context. As one intern notes, if they had not had this opportunity, “I would have missed out on seeing how adaptable the skills I had were, and understanding that they could be applied to a broad spectrum of jobs” (Caddell 2012). Yet the TSIS programme can also offer

broader insights into skills and attributes that may be of interest to people working across Scotland's HE sector.

One of the most significant areas identified by TSIS for further action and support is the articulation of skills and experience. The quality of applications for the internships is mixed both in terms of the quantity of the information provided by students and, crucially, the quality and targeted nature of the evidence presented in response to specific questions (Caddell 2012, Caddell & Jones 2013). If the capacity and confidence to transfer / translate skills and knowledge between contexts is a graduate attribute that universities aspire to the further, it is critical to undertake detailed analysis of how students negotiate the work: study interface and how they utilise the tools and opportunities open to them.

Reflection at Work-Learning Interface: Purpose, practice and participation

So how, then, does the insight from TSIS develop our understanding of how to encourage reflection as a basis for enhanced self-efficacy, confidence and employability? Firstly, and most importantly, there is a need to review the balance between 'embedding' skills development in the curriculum and the imperative that students are able to understand and articulate those skills clearly to others. The evidence from the 6,000+ application forms received by TSIS is of a considerable breadth of student capacity in this area. Understanding, ordering, articulating and, crucially, applying skills and knowledge in new contexts remain areas that – across institutions and student groups – require further support.

Secondly, our work suggests there is a need to unpack the 'black box' of reflection and evaluation, to unpack what and how this can be supported. A plethora of tools are available for use by module teams and student support services, from PDP platforms to reflective journals and collaborative blogs. However, the ways in which these are engaged with by students requires further interrogation – what and why do students engage with them? The assumption that students will only engage with materials if they are assessed in some way poses particular challenges in relation to encouraging reflection and self-evaluation. If genuine reflection is to sit alongside assessment then care needs to be taken to clearly articulate the intended learning outcomes and the specific skills being assessed.

Further, the TSIS work highlights the importance of offering a range of tools and alternative 'spaces' to encourage students to step back from and review their own development. This has meant presenting interns with alternative media to work in, such as the pictorial approach of a *Talking Mats* toolkit, or the acting and presentation-focused approach of the 'Communicate with Confidence' workshop. For many students these approaches have proved challenging, even uncomfortable. But the physicality of the approaches and the tactile, even visceral, engagement that they encourage, appear to promote more critical engagement and re-thinking of the relevance and impact of the internship experience. Finding space for reflection remains a key challenge, with students appreciating the opportunity to step outside the 'normal' space for interaction and to think about how to shape and tell their story differently.

Sitting outside module frameworks has offered TSIS space to explore alternative spaces for reflection and action both in terms of the tools used and the focus of engagement – the broader spectrum of learning-work interface rather than a specific set of module learning outcomes. Exploring skills articulation and appreciation as it is expressed at the work/life: learning interface is key to understanding if and how the tacit can be made explicit. The insights from TSIS offer a unique picture of the challenge students face and, perhaps, some pointers to the conceptual and practical

curriculum challenges institutions must tackle if they are to support the move from skills and knowledge development to greater self-efficacy, skills appreciation and articulation, and self-confidence.

Bibliography

Barrie, S.C. (2007). A conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of graduate attributes. *Studies in Higher Education* 32(4) 439-458.

Caddell, M. (2012) *Making internships work for Scotland's students and third sector organisations. Third Sector Internships Scotland Midpoint report.* TSIS: Edinburgh.
[http://www.3rdsectorintern.com/assets/uploads/employers/TSIS%20Mid%20Point%20Review%20June%202012%20\(web\).pdf](http://www.3rdsectorintern.com/assets/uploads/employers/TSIS%20Mid%20Point%20Review%20June%202012%20(web).pdf)

Caddell, M. & Jones, H. (2013) *Third Sector Internships Scotland: Data Overview 2010-13.* TSIS: Edinburgh
<https://www.3rdsectorintern.com/assets/uploads/employers/TSIS%20Data%20Oveview%202010-13.pdf>

Dacre Pool, L. & Sewell, P. (2007) The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education and Training.* 49 (4) 277-289.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* Boston: D.C. Heath and Company.

Farrow, R. (2011) *Theories of Reflective Learning.* Blog posted 4th October 2011.
<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/openminded/?p=318>

Gibbs G (1988) *Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods.* Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic: Oxford

Hounsell, D. (2010) *Graduates For The 21st Century: Synthesis of work 2010-2011.* QAA Enhancement Themes. Glasgow.

<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/pages/docdetail/docs/report/synthesis-of-work-of-the-theme-end-of-year-report-dai-hounsell>

Kolb, D (1984) *Experiential Learning as the Science of Learning and Development,* Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall

Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. and Boydell, T. (1991, 1996) *The Learning Company. A strategy for sustainable development,* London: McGraw-Hill.

Pegg, A., Waldock, J. ,Hendy-Isaac, S., Lawton, R. (2012) *Pedagogy for Employability.* Higher Education Academy. York.

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf

Rodgers, C. (2002) Defining reflection: Another look at John Dewey and reflective thinking. *Teachers College Record.* Vol. 4, Number 4, pp. 842-866.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* New York: Basic Books.

SFC (2004) *Learning to Work: Enhancing employability and enterprise in Scottish further and higher education.* Scottish Funding Council: Edinburgh.

http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20090411224926/http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/pubs_other_sfecarchive/learning_to_work.pdf

SFC (2009) *Learning to Work Two: Developing the Council's employability strategy: consultation outcomes, action plan and invitation to develop proposals.* Scottish Funding Council. Edinburgh.

<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CircularsSFC4109/sfc4109.pdf>

Stroobants, H, Chambers, P and Clarke, B (eds) (2007) *Reflective Journeys. A Fieldbook for Facilitating Lifelong Learning in Vocational Education and Training*. Leonardo da Vinci REFLECT Project Publication, Istituto Guglielmo, Tagliacane, Rome

Yorke, M. (2006) Employability in higher education: what it is, what it is not. ESECT / The Higher Education Academy. York. http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/was%20York%20-%20delete%20this%20soon/documents/ourwork/tla/employability/id116_employability_in_higher_education_336.pdf

Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2004) 'Self-theories: some implications for teaching and learning in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education* 29, (1) 25-37

Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2007) 'Evidence-informed pedagogy and the enhancement of student employability', *Teaching in Higher Education* 12, (2) 157-170