

Exploring the 'captive triangle': students' experience of theory, practice and research (0172)

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Introduction

This paper reports on one study within a wider project. The wider project is concerned with the role of work-based placement learning within undergraduate education. This study is specifically concerned with the 'captive triangle' (Usher and Bryant, 1989): students' experience of theory, practice and research in relation to their placement. Work-based placement learning has long been a feature of business and management education, usually being a compulsory requirement within most business studies degrees. It is an institutionalised procedure and, accordingly, is subject to Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Code of practice and subject benchmark statements. Yet although placement learning is a well-established feature of undergraduate business programmes, the QAA subject benchmark statement for General business and management programmes of study includes only one reference to placement as follows:

'There should be integration between theory and practice by a variety of means according to the mode of delivery including, for example, work-based learning, work experience or placement, exposure to business issues including employer-based case studies, visits and inputs from visiting practising managers.'(QAA, 2007, para 4.2).

There is a relatively small body of research into the impact of placement experience on the learning of students. Such research has investigated three main aspects of placement. First, there have been a range of studies over the last two decades on how placement prepares students for, and makes them more effective in, the workplace after graduation. These studies have tended to focus upon skills development and enhancement (Bourner and Ellerker, 1993a, 1993b; Harvey *et al.*, 1997; Bowes and Harvey, 1999; Mason *et al.*, 2003). More recently, there have been studies into the relationship between placement and subsequent academic performance that indicate that the academic performance of students may be enhanced by the undertaking of a placement (see Lucas and Tan, 2007, for a review of this evidence). However, there is little evidence to indicate why this might be so. Little and Harvey (2006, p.2) point out that there is very little research that 'explicitly explores how the placement experience translates into academic development' and 'much is taken for granted, the observed maturity of undergraduates returning from a period of work placement is assumed to carry over into a more studious or reflective approach to learning but there is little direct evidence to be found of this in the literature'.

Research study, objectives and methodology

Accordingly, this study examines the way in which integration of theory and practice occurs, or is supported, during work-based placement learning and during the final year of study. The context for the study is a business and accounting degree programme in a United Kingdom new university. One objective for this placement year within this programme was: 'to allow students to reflect on and apply theoretical knowledge gained from their award'. Interviews were conducted with 17 placement students during and after their placement (32 interviews in total). The methodology is based on a social constructivist view of learning and falls into the naturalistic area of enquiry. The emphasis on how students make meaning of their experience and the way in which this is related to their learning. The interviews were therefore long (usually one hour) and semi-structured. The aim was to allow the student's own frame of reference to emerge.

Findings

The findings reveal that students experienced 'the integration of theory and practice' in a limited number of ways. In particular, it was found that students did not readily reflect on the application of

theoretical knowledge. Four aspects emerged as central. Firstly, it was difficult to identify the extent to which prior studies informed experience in the placement. This arose because most students found it difficult to recall what they had studied in the first and second years of their degree course. Where there was some recall, theory was observed to provide 'labels' or 'naming' for practices that they could recognise. Where there was slightly more recall students started to see some 'knowledge' differently as a result of their placement. However, such discussion lacked fluency or coherence. Secondly, most students were unable to identify 'theories' within their studies or to discuss the nature or role of theory. Thirdly, a small minority of students did discuss and question the inter-relationship between theory and practice. This led them to question the role of theory and to identify the role of 'experience' as a source of knowledge within the workplace. Finally, most students experienced a changed view of business that could inform their final year studies. This 'changed view' involved seeing business 'as a process' and involved changed perspectives of organisations (their goals and controls; their efficiency and the roles of teams, departments and individuals within the organisation).

Implications

Placement appears to offer a rich developmental and learning environment for students. However, these findings indicate that there is scope to improve the placement experience such that students can use it more proactively to challenge their understandings about the nature and relationship of theory, practice and research and to support critical reflection. As was discussed above the QAA subject benchmark statements for General business and management states that the placement is a means of supporting the 'integration of theory and practice'. This was translated into the following objective for the placement year within the university programme within this study: 'to allow students to reflect on and apply theoretical knowledge gained from their award'. These two objectives differ in wording and, possibly, intent. What underpins these two objectives are assumptions that theory and practice are of such a nature that they can be 'integrated', or that theoretical knowledge can be 'applied'. However, such assumptions can be questioned and they also have to be set against the ways in which students experience or understand these phenomena. The paper concludes with a review of curriculum frameworks that might address these issues. In particular, this includes a discussion of the 'connective' model proposed by Guile and Griffiths (2001).

References

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