

## Re-designing work-related learning in higher education

### Introduction

As a lecturer involved in continuous professional development courses for career and work-related learning professionals, I have become increasingly interested in the integration of theory and practice in the design of work-related learning and the link between research and teaching. My intentions (and those of my collaborators) were to make visible and explicit the process of course construction with an *unbuilt design* (Frigerio, Mendez and McCash 2012). As such, our goals were heuristic. We sought to stimulate learning, adaptation and debate, not by prescribing a model, but through modelling an approach to the integration of theory and practice in work-related learning. Dialogue and engagement with others was consequently anticipated and welcomed as part of the project.

### The process of course design

As indicated above, it was felt important to surface the range of perspectives that were brought to bear on the process of module design. This thinking is now explained here and includes ideas drawn from critical pedagogy, constructivist and experiential learning, concept mapping and the co-authors' wider experiences.

Simon, Dippo and Schenke (1991) stress the importance of grounding course design in participants' experiences of learning and work. Grey, Knights and Willmott argue that education should be "sensitive to everyday experience and forms of 'knowledge' other than the purely disciplinary" and enable "students to relate knowledge to their own experience of 'being in the world'" (1996: 100). Freire (1998) places an emphasis on the role of the participants in course construction and societal change. It was felt that these critical pedagogical perspectives had value in emphasising a reflective and grounded approach in the design of work-related learning (also see later comments on

grounded concept mapping). In terms of the module workshops, participants were enabled to question taken-for-granted assumptions and design theoretically-informed questions *prior to* going on placement. The exploration of these questions became a key part of the placement research project. In addition, module workshops featured a blend of teaching materials from popular and academic cultures. These included the structured use of mixed media such as popular film (e.g. *Made in Dagenham*), newspaper reports (e.g. an article from the Independent on the Occupy Movement) and policy documents (e.g. the Wilson Review) alongside peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs and book chapters. Sessions on presentation and critical thinking skills were also contextualised to the participant context (e.g. a mooted debate on transactional versus transformational leadership for management students).

The social dimensions of work-related learning were given weight and a narrowly individualising approach was eschewed. For example, participants were enabled to share different experiences of work, and explore the consequences for both self and others of adopting particular behaviours. Through this, participants were intended to influence their working lives *and those of others* in contrasting ways.

One of the co-authors, Richard Mendez, had previously been involved in a series of employability-hybrid modules relating to topics such as critical management and applied mathematics (e.g. Matthews-Lane, Rix and Mendez 2011). He aimed to link employability with debates and topics in discipline areas and thereby avoid an atheoretical, bolt-on approach to work-related learning. The module therefore featured key debates within management studies (e.g. over leadership styles, management identity and approaches to career management).

A constructivist and experiential approach to course design was adopted (Kolb 1984). The processes of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation were reflected in the phrasing of the learning outcomes and designed to let participants arrive at their own conclusions and develop actions based on those. This approach also

influenced the method adopted in the integration of research with teaching. To illustrate, examples of research from peer-reviewed books and journals were introduced into the course, not as top tips, but simply as a series of claims for the participants to judge and interpret (e.g. two radically contrasting perspectives on career management). Participants were enabled to explore these contrasting perspectives, evaluate them and design responses.

Detailed assessment methods were selected focusing on formative, summative and subsequent assessment. Ideas were proposed for the measurement of longer-term impact. It was proposed that assessment of the key concepts could take place after leaving the institution, perhaps at 12, 36 or 60 months, once the participants had engaged in further work-related learning. This feedback could be used to inform the subsequent re-design of the module. A range of assessment techniques were employed including reflective blogs, a placement research project and formal presentations. The rationale for these techniques was made explicit, for example, the reflective blogs were designed to enable reflection on the key concepts before, during and after placement. They were also suggested to overcome the individualising nature of undertaking separate placements and enable participants to learn from each others' experiences.

Amundsen, Weston and McAlpine (2008: 652) have developed a concept mapping method to aid in university academics' analysis of course content. I found a simplified version of this process helpful in bringing together the perspectives outlined above. I also sought to ground this process of concept mapping in the participants' wider experiences of work. This aspect was informed by two of the co-authors' previous work on developing student learning (Frigerio 2010; McCash 2011). In the latter publication, the process of concept mapping had been identified but not modelled. This time, it was felt important to model the process more fully. The grounded concept mapping process consisted of 6 stages and the final stage is shown below (figure 1). This involved creating a concept map to inform a series of module workshops.

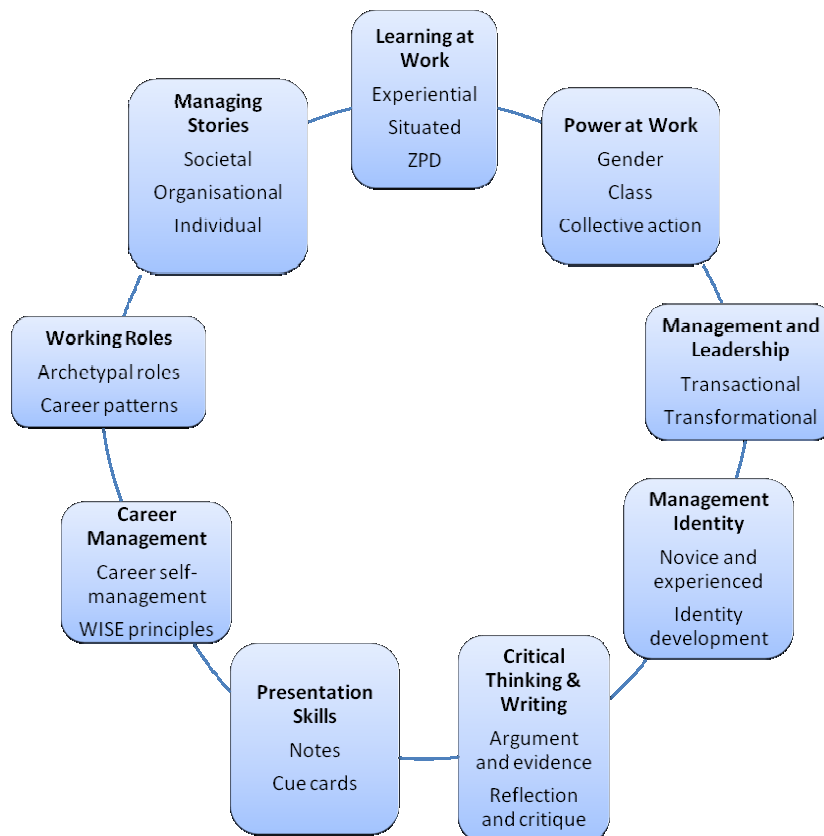


Figure 1

## Final points

This is an interim report as the project is still unfolding. The unbuilt design is now being circulated as part of a series of talks and via physical and online networks. Initial indications are that it is having the intended effect of stimulating debate and discussion.

This approach has significant implications for the design and application of further research in work-related learning. It suggests that a key outcome for such research could be inclusion in the curriculum as a tool for participants to engage in the process of evaluation, interpretation and experimentation.

## List of references

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