

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING SURVEY

A Critical Review of Contemporary Practice: Experiential and work-based learning in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST)

November 2011

By

David Pierce

The Learning from Experience Trust

CONTENTS

Summary	page 3
Background	page 3
Introduction	page 5
The range of experiential learning	page 5
Current practice	page 7
Conclusion	page 10
Resources/references	page 11
Appendix	page 13

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING SURVEY

SUMMARY

This short review of practice provides an insight into the ways in which experiential and work-based learning is now given academic recognition within the subject areas of Hospitality, Sport and Tourism. It begins by describing how the introduction of Credit Accumulation and Transfer in the 1980's provided opportunities for its application to traditional work experiences such as sandwich courses and then the extension of academic recognition to other experiences as part of a wider and more responsive HE curriculum. It continues by reporting the views of academics from a range of universities. The respondents in the review were drawn from the body of academic practitioners who have direct experience of working with students who exploit their workplace and other experiences for learning. The report offers an insight into a range of approaches, together with practitioners' views on what challenges need to be addressed when designing programmes and assessment which can demonstrably meet the standards required by higher education.

BACKGROUND

Much attention has been paid to the opportunities for learning provided by the workplace and the experiences, planned or otherwise, available there. Within higher education the history of formally encouraging work experience for undergraduates stretches back to the 1950's where it was introduced as an integral part of sandwich courses. Originally in sandwich awards workplace experience was an explicit part of the programme of study, but it was not clearly integrated with the academic study taking place in the university. As long ago as 1989 the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) funded a project on 'Assessing Experiential Learning in Sandwich Placements' in an attempt to more precisely identify the educational value of the work placement in sandwich degrees and to support the full integration of the learning involved into academic awards.

At about the same time the MSC began to fund a major series of development projects within higher education many of which focused on the use of credit to recognise experiential learning. It also promoted the use of the term work-based learning (WBL) widely for the first time in the higher education sector. Of the 70 projects supported by the MSC in the early 1990's, many were concerned with WBL and its 'integration, assessment and accreditation within academic programmes'. In a review of these projects (Learning Through Work, 1992) one observation was made expressing a view which will be recognised by colleagues involved with experiential work-based learning today: 'The crux of the issue is academic credibility and quality – the extent to which institutions and other accrediting bodies can feel

confident that learning gained through work can be reliably assessed and is of equivalent standard to that deriving from more established modes of learning’.

Common criticisms of placement learning included accusations that participants were merely being used as cheap labour, that it may be a way of providing work experience but the quality of that experience could vary considerably, and that it was difficult for students to demonstrate an appropriate level of learning in the workplace.

However, more recently, there has been considerable debate about the role of experiential work-based learning in higher education programmes. One of the triggers for this debate was the introduction of the Foundation Degree (FD) in 2001. Although this award still represents a small element of higher education provision, the mode of its introduction and the policy emphasis on the need for higher education to engage with vocational awards and with learners who were based in the workplace meant that the award was very high profile. FDs were introduced to address intermediate skills level shortages both nationally and regionally, and to enhance the employability of students. Experiential work-based learning was required to be an integral element of such degrees, and the introduction of the award stimulated considerable debate relating to the integration of academic and work-based learning.

In addition, the recent emphasis on employer engagement and workforce development – for example, through the HEFCE funded projects – has also extended practice in this area. Discussions of experiential work-based learning often locate recognition of such learning in the context of the knowledge economy and of the workforce development which is emphasised as part of a more effective response to the need for higher level skills in the workplace.

There is now a wide range of academic practice relating to the recognition and assessment of learning in the workplace, which can either enhance the employability of full-time students or provide a more flexible response to part-time learners who are working. The Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) Code of Practice relating to Work-Based and Placement Learning defines work-based learning as ‘learning that is integral to a higher education programme and is usually achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment, the assessment of reflective practice and the design of appropriate learning outcomes’ (QAA, 2007, p.4). This definition was deliberately broad as QAA was concerned that a ‘formal definition [of work-based learning] might even be counter-productive and act as a constraint to the further development of innovative practice in this area’ (ibid., p.4).

The innovative work relating to supporting and assessing experiential learning in the workplace can be seen as part of the more flexible and responsive approaches in higher education, which have been student-centred and have emphasised the importance of experience for learning. Pedagogic perspectives which draw on a constructivist approach to learning offer a valuable enhancement to current practice

related to learning and teaching in higher education. For example, Biggs (2003) argues that it is not what the teacher teaches, but 'what the learner has to *do* to create knowledge [that] is the important thing' and emphasises the importance of active learning (p.12). Such an emphasis on the importance of learning through activity and engagement with the social world has considerable implications both for the recognition of experiential work-based learning and for the structuring of the learning experience in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

This review set out 'to identify the range of practice relating to academic recognition of experiential and work-based learning, how this informs undergraduate curriculum design, particularly with regard to modes of assessment, and to highlight examples of effective practice'. The intention was to focus on current (as opposed to prior) experiential and work-based learning which students are having assessed as part of their studies within the subject areas of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. The aim was to review a representative range of practice within these areas including Honours degrees and small credit bearing awards by means of semi-structured telephone interviews with members of academic staff directly involved with the teaching, learning and assessment activities on the programmes identified. It was hoped to make successful contact with up to ten respondents.

In the event interviews were held with 9 people representing 8 universities. These were:

Bournemouth University
Brighton University
Sheffield Hallam University
Leeds Metropolitan University
Liverpool John Moores University
University of Surrey
University of Gloucestershire
Oxford Brookes University

THE RANGE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Every interviewee was able to say that the principle of recognising experiential learning was not simply accepted but also practiced in their institution. Some expressed surprise that the question was being asked and outlined the ways they had been implementing it, sometimes for many years, in their institutions. 'We have a long tradition of recognising work experience', said one whilst another proclaimed, 'Work experience is very important'. The motivation for this was described by one

who said that it was important for students to 'do this real stuff...it's about employability'. There is more than one way in which this is achieved. The subjects surveyed are clearly vocational ones and there are three distinctly different ways in which experiential learning is being recognised for credit within programmes.

- a) Through the recognition of the learning acquired during the work placement year of a sandwich degree.
- b) Through the completion of a specific module designed for the purpose.
- c) Through recognition and assessment of the experimentation and practice undertaken within the normal curriculum.

There is a range of practice in recognising the learning from the work placement within a sandwich course. A traditional sandwich consists of three academic years and a placement year that is mostly compulsory but sometimes not. Originally students were awarded a pass or fail at the end of the placement year and in general it was regarded as a semi-detached although much valued part of the degree. CATS enabled credit to be awarded for assessed learning from the placement but, as one respondent said, 'students do not want that kind of credit' because it only has value if it can be usefully 'cashed in'. Nevertheless most institutions have improved the integration of the placement year with the three college-based years and are beginning to award credit for it which is then counted towards the degree. An e-portfolio is widely being used to collect and demonstrate evidence of learning.

One respondent described the portfolio as 'complex and academic' whilst another said theirs was 'less academic' than other work but still warranted the award of credit. All the necessary formalities expected of an accredited module are adhered to with learning outcomes, level descriptors and criteria made explicit. Employers are involved as much as possible with learning agreements being drawn up and the students' performance evaluated against them by both the employer representative and an academic.

Some modules are offered to students who are not pursuing sandwich courses with titles which include: Professional Development, People and Performance, Applied and Contemporary Practice but they are similar in that they are all concerned with learning from students' experience. Mainly this is through the use of a work placement shorter than that for a sandwich course with planned outcomes including the acquisition of skills and knowledge, opportunities for reflection, evaluation of career choices and applying theoretical concepts to real world experiences. Assessment is variously through the use of learning agreements, e-portfolios, written reports, projects and presentations with grading having superseded the old pass/fail marking.

The third way in which experiential learning is recognised might be regarded as both the most obvious and yet the least visible form. In Hospitality courses in particular (but no doubt in others too) it has been normal practice for many years to assess

students as they experiment and train in laboratories and training kitchens and restaurants. Assessment here is done by trainers' observations against a set of criteria and may be 'quite subjective' compared to other methods.

The respondents interviewed were all enthusiastic about the need to recognise the learning from student experience and none reported significant problems associated with this, although the cultures within the institutions unsurprisingly did seem to vary. Hence, there appeared to be a greater need to justify practices in some places where the tradition was not so strong. One respondent said that they 'defend what they are doing' by writing clear criteria. Others argued that their actions can easily be justified on the grounds that students had to be prepared vocationally as well as academically. Another said 'these processes have been in place for ten years...and there are no barriers'. In the pursuit of flexible learning opportunities for students one respondent explained that because students had difficulty in supplying academic references to support their work the need for them had been removed. Of course, all the credit-bearing learning processes were supported by the necessary documentation. Learning outcomes, assessment criteria, level descriptors etc were all in place in accordance with institutional requirements.

To summarise, none of these respondents found the idea of awarding credit for experiential learning in any way alien to them or to accepted practice in their institution. It was a normal part of their offer to students and in many ways (mandatory modules or practical work within the curriculum) a routine part of their degree programme. To quantify the impact of these offers and the student take-up of them was not an aim of this survey but it was clear that many students valued the opportunity to gain experience (especially at work) and to develop evidence that they had learned from it. On the other hand there continue to be some students that question the necessity for work experience on the grounds that it was not relevant to their perceived needs and was merely a cover for their use as 'cheap labour'.

CURRENT PRACTICE

Assessment, or at least the provision of evidence for it, does not appear to be as big a problem as it once was. There are many tools available, some of which are suitable not only for the assessment of experiential learning. First however, we list a range of those experiences which can be captured and to an extent are being recognised as valid learning experiences. Harvey and Little, (1998) usefully categorised undergraduate work experience as follows:

(1) Organised work experience as part of a programme of study;

There are three main variants:

- A conventional programme with some work-experience element attached to it, either as an optional or compulsory component.
- 'Generic' work-experience modules that are available to students on a range of programmes.
- Work experience through a programme that is wholly, or predominantly, delivered in the workplace setting.

(2) Organised work experience external to programme of study;

Students may participate in the growing number of programmes offering help in personal development and/or employability such as STEP, CRAC Insight, and university Award schemes.

(3) *ad hoc* work experience external to a programme of study.

This might be part-time work during term time or vacation work, paid or unpaid. In addition there may be a host of other experiences, not work related, some of which may be encountered within the degree curriculum. For example, participating in research, attending or participating in conferences, laboratory work, training restaurants, coaching, and so on. Increasingly these activities are being captured within modules and in such a way that students can enjoy some flexibility to design their own programmes.

These categories are not as clearly defined as they may at first appear to be and some experiences may fulfil more than one purpose. For example, to work in a training restaurant on a university site may enable the acquisition of skills, relate hospitality theory to practice, simulate a real work environment and the employability benefits that result. However, it may not be thought of within the curriculum as work experience, perhaps a better and increasingly used term is work related learning. This has been defined as 'learning outcomes achieved through activities which are based in, or derive from, the context of the workplace' (Hills, J. et al, 2004). Nevertheless many such experiences were reflected in the descriptions of practice outlined in the interviews. They encompassed examples across the range of 'experience' including live projects, work shadowing, consultancy and volunteering. Often students worked in groups to complete assignments so benefitting also from the acquisition of team working skills.

A typical module at one institution, entitled Events Management Skills in the Workplace, 'requires the student to develop a learning contract with the module tutor and host organisation which clarifies the professional and vocational skills and knowledge that the student will be seeking to develop through the work experience, and which specifies the learning support required, the assessment structure and the timescale for completion. The nature and length of the work experience will be different for each student; it may include work over short or long periods, full or part time. The assessment will be based upon the preparation of a portfolio of evidence,

the development of an action plan and an updated cv.’ A two-week placement at any time of the year can be rewarded with 15 credits.

At another institution, Sport and Exercise and Sport, Physical Activity and Health students are given a compulsory module called Professional Development. They are allocated 100 hours in which ‘they will plan and undertake a series of learning opportunities which may include work experience, coaching courses, skills for learning courses, volunteering and research projects’. In conjunction with their tutor students develop a learning contract outlining how they intend to acquire specified learning outcomes. Assessment is then against those plans and a generic set of competences by means of writing a job application, a personal statement and an interview. Staff are prepared to be highly flexible in developing these learning contracts and nothing is regarded as ‘out of bounds’.

One respondent described a 15 credit, level 6 module entitled Leadership and Professional Development. This included substantial experience of mentoring and gave students the opportunity to be mentored by an employer and then to become a mentor themselves with first year students as their mentees. Reflective reports were written about their experiences in which they were expected to make the academic links with the rest of the curriculum.

An Events Industry Experience module at another institution is described as ‘a 10 credit module offering an opportunity for students to gain valuable experience within events and allied sectors. During this module you will also have a valuable opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills you have gained at university in the workplace. The work ‘industry experience’ you undertake must total at least 120 hours, and may be a paid or unpaid voluntary placement or voluntary activity. You can (and it is recommended you) use a variety of experience to complete your 120 hours – you do not need to only undertake your industry experience with one organisation’. Assessment is by means of a portfolio. At the same institution an accredited module for the placement year in a long-running sandwich course is to be made compulsory next year. This will contribute 20 credits to the degree requirement. In this institution such developments are not regarded as innovative. It has a long history of similar work and ‘flexibility and exploration are important as times and circumstances change.’ Module leaders are encouraged to try out new forms of assessment and credit is commonly awarded for presentations, videos, web pages designed etc. Due to the difficulty in finding work placements sandwich hours can be accrued and assessment methods are adapted to suit transient work experiences. It was clear that for many the needs of students and their learning preferences were paramount. ‘We won’t say no, we’ll explore possibilities’, said one respondent. That view would be shared by many others interviewed in the survey. Others are restricted by the regulations and how they are interpreted within the culture of particular universities.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that on the basis of this survey the practice of recognising experiential learning for credit has expanded and developed in recent years. This appears to have been driven firstly by the opportunities presented by CATS and their exploitation by those who have been trying to improve sandwich course integration over the years. Second, by the growing introduction of short work placements that can also be given credit. Thirdly, the continuing pressure on universities over the last quarter of a century to prepare students for employment and to engage with employers on workforce development. Fourthly, the recognition that work related learning does not necessarily depend upon work placements but can be achieved through simulation within universities and the use of volunteering and other experiences. Such environments are being used to develop personal skills and knowledge which have relevance to students' employability and degree success. Whether the progress noted in these subject areas is echoed in others is difficult to say but it is likely that other vocational areas have been treading a similar path as a result of the continuing developments and discussions about higher education. As one respondent said, 'the nature of our subject makes it difficult not to go into the real world'. That must be true of many vocational areas.

In spite of all this progress two significant challenges remain. First, to find ways of transferring these developments into non-vocational subject areas. No matter how encouraging the recent extension of practice in these areas may be it is far from being typical of other areas. Traditional models of delivering teaching and learning remain widespread with much resistance, for a variety of reasons, to change. For, example, just as part-time students have always presented staff with new (and difficult) challenges so, to offer full-time students opportunities to experience 'the real world' can be a mixed blessing for some academics. Second, further to develop assessment procedures. As one interviewee said, 'All students can't be watched all the time' when they are learning through experience and 'some forms of summative assessment' are needed. She suspected there was much more that could be done to develop both the experiences and the assessment procedures to suit them. The development of assessment procedures that welcome the participation of employers or the involvement of students' peers is one trend highlighted in this survey. Even so the respondent regretted the passing of opportunities that the subject centres had offered to exchange and network with others about developing practice.

RESOURCES/REFERENCES

- Armsby, P. (2006) The Legitimation of Knowledge : a work-based perspective of APEL. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 25(4) pp 363-383
- Barnett, R. (2000) University Knowledge in an Age of Supercomplexity, *Higher Education* 40(3) pp 409-422
- Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (2nd Edition) The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University, Maidenhead
- Brennan, J., Little, B. (1996) *A Review of Work Based Learning in Higher Education*
- Conradi, C., Evans, N. and Valk, A. (Eds) (2006) *Recognising Experiential Learning Practices in European Universities* Tartu University Press : Tartu, Estonia
- Deardon, G. (1989) *Learning while Earning: Learning Contracts for Employees*, LET, Employment Department
- Dewey, J. (1997) *Experience and Education* Touchstone, New York
- Duckenfeld, M., Stirner, P. *Learning Through Work* (1992) The Employment Department
- Evans, N. (1987) *Assessing Experiential Learning*, Longman for Further Education Unit, London
- Evans, N. (1987) *Handbook for the Assessment of Experiential Learning*. LET, County of Avon Education Department
- Evans, N. (1988) *The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning*, Council for National Academic Awards
- Evans, N. (1989) *Assessing Prior Experiential Learning*, *Industrial and Commercial Training* 21(1)
- Evans, N (1993) *Work Based Learning for Academic Credit*. LET, Employment Department
- Evans, N. (1993) *Learner Managed Learning Through Learning While Earning* in N. Graves (Ed) *Learner Managed Learning : Practice, theory and policy* Higher Education for Capability, Leeds pp 174-178
- Harvey, L. (2009) *Review of research literature focussed on Foundation Degrees*, *Foundation Degree Forward*, Lichfield, Staffordshire.
- Hills, J et.al. (2004) *Dine Out on Work Related Learning*, University of Newcastle upon Tyne and University of Sunderland.

Learning from Experience Trust website: www.learningexperience.org.uk A number of downloadable documents are available from this site.

Marshall, I (1992), Contract Learning in Sandwich Placements, Employment Department, Napier Polytechnic.

Peters, H. (2005) Contested discourses: assessing the outcomes of learning from experience for the award of credit in higher education, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 30(2) pp 273-285

Quality Assurance Agency (2010) Employer-responsive provision survey: a reflective report, QAA, Gloucester

Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) website: www.seec.org.uk SEEC members have considerable experience and expertise relating to experiential work-based learning and higher education, and SEEC has a range of publications

Tynjala, P. (1999), Towards expert knowledge? A comparison between a constructivist and a traditional learning environment in the university, *International Journal of Educational Research* 31 (Research Monograph) pp 357-442

Walsh, A. (2009) 'What is distinctive about work-based knowledge and learning?' in *Work-based Learning Workforce Development: Connections, Frameworks and Processes* Higher Education Academy, York

Wedgwood, M. (2007) Employer Engagement: Higher education for the workforce, unpublished report of study undertaken for the Department for Education and Skills

APPENDIX

INTERVIEWEES

Bournemouth University

Crispin Farbrother, Programme Leader, Hospitality, School of Tourism

Simon Thomas, Senior Lecturer, Hospitality Management

Brighton University

Chris Dutton, Assistant Head of School, School of Service Management

Sheffield Hallam University

John Perry, Programme Leader, Events, Food, Hospitality and Tourism

Leeds Metropolitan University

Andy Smith, Senior Lecturer, Physical Activity, Exercise and Health

Liverpool John Moores University

Sarah Nixon, Principal Lecturer in Sports Development with Business

University of Gloucestershire

Nic Matthews, Senior Lecturer in Sports Management

Keith Donne, Director of Studies, Events, Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism

Oxford Brookes University

Angela Maher, Programme Leader, Hospitality and Tourism

PROGRAMMES FROM WHICH RESPONDENTS GAVE EXAMPLES

Hospitality Management

BSc Events and Leisure Management

BA (Hons) Events Management

MSc Sport and Exercise Science

BA (Hons) International Tourism Management

Events Management Skills in the Workplace (15 credit module)

Professional Development in Sport and Exercise Science (15 credit module)

People and Performance (20 credit module)

Examining Current Issues in Sport (24 credit module)