

Work-based Learning in the Humanities: a welcome stranger?

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Abstract

Work-based learning is rare in Humanities subjects in Higher Education, but the increasing pressure to focus on employability from both the government and students means that there are increasing incentives to embed it into Humanities offerings. The literature on work-based learning describes both the enormous potential it has to contribute to learning but also some potential dangers and pitfalls. This article explores the role of work-based learning in the Humanities through a detailed case study of the innovative *Work Based Project* at Sheffield Hallam University. The case study describes how the module at Sheffield Hallam negotiates potential problems and emerges as a successful module with outstanding feedback from students. This is linked to a wider discussion of the opportunities, dangers, and practicalities of embedding work based learning in Humanities subjects.

Keywords: work-based learning, humanities, reflection, skills,

Introduction

This is a discussion about the place of work-based learning in humanities disciplines. McHale (2010: 161) describes how 'work-based projects can be perceived as a 'Cinderella' subject within the tradition of Humanities', so is it time to recognise Cinderella's inherent beauty and invite her to the ball, or keep her safely hidden away?

The discussion is based on the literature as well as detailed evidence drawn from an innovative module entitled the *Work Based Project* in humanities at Sheffield Hallam

University. The module tutor for the Work Based Project provided detailed information about the module, including teaching materials and significant data written by the students themselves. The discussion is, clearly, also influenced by my own background and opinions. I teach a humanities subject (English Language) and have conducted pedagogic research in Education for Sustainability, which has the goal of creating a more equitable and sustainable society rather than narrow commercial goals (Stibbe, 2009). I am both convinced of the necessity for students to gain skills outside the classroom in real life situations, and wary of the danger that students are set up as objects to be transformed by employers' economic agendas rather than acting as critical agents working towards a more humane and environmentally responsible society.

It is worth pointing out from the start that despite my cautious approach to work-based learning I was pleasantly surprised by how positive the experience of students taking the Work Based Project was, and this has given me an optimistic view of the possibilities for work-based learning in the humanities. Much of the literature confirmed this view, although there were also some critiques and issues that are brought up that are vital to consider when setting up similar programmes. Lee, McGuiggan and Holland (2010: 565) sum this up in one sentence: 'The literature supports the beneficial role of work-based learning in higher education ... although tension can arise from competing expectations of student, higher education institution and community partner stakeholders'. This discussion paper looks at both the effectiveness of work-based learning and the potential 'tensions', using evidence from the Sheffield Hallam module as an illustrative case study.

Work-Based Learning in the Humanities

Work-based learning has a long tradition in professional areas such as teaching and nursing, where it forms an essential part of the degree program. The kind of real-world problems that such subjects deal with are just too complex and multifaceted to simulate accurately in a classroom setting. Problem-based learning in workplace settings has proven to be 'an effective approach to teaching as real life, problem-based learning provides opportunities for students to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile' (Lee et al 2010, 563). A more recent development consists of whole degrees which are designed for employees to take in their own workplace. For these degrees, students work with higher education tutors and employers towards their own professional development

and improvements in the host organisation. For example, students on the *Learning Technology Research BA* in Anglia Ruskin University study entirely on-line in what is described as ‘a virtual degree in that students do not have to attend University as a conventional student but rather research their way to a degree qualification by studying their own job as they work at their own pace’. In 2008 the QAA produced its *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* which requires degree programmes in all subjects to have ‘transferable skills necessary for employment’, including ‘decision making in complex and unpredictable contexts’ (FHEQ 2008: 19). This has created an incentive for work-based learning to occur in disciplines which are not traditionally employment-orientated, such as humanities, where there may be a more indirect relationship between the traditional theories and methods of the discipline and the learning that occurs in the workplace.

The Sheffield Hallam Work-Based Project Module in the Humanities

Sheffield Hallam University has been running Work-Based Projects in the humanities for seventeen years. Undergraduate students in English Language take a single work-based learning module as a compulsory part of their degree in the second year, and it is open as an option for all other humanities students (including final year students) to take. The module itself is 20 credits, spread over one year, and includes six taught sessions (3 in each semester) and a series of tutorials. The tutorials support the students in their choice of project, dilemmas they are facing, and the boundaries of responsibility through guidance, discussion and reflection. Students produce a portfolio at the end which includes a learning log, learning diary, supporting materials, SWOT analysis and a skills audit. The tutor made the following comment about the skills audit:

Students do a Skills Audit at 3 intervals through the module which includes the skill of reflection. This is a fun exercise where they assess their perception of progress or their previous over-estimation of their skills. It promotes laughter and self-realisation at the mid point of the year. Humility starts to emerge! They love to hear of each others' projects, challenges and solutions and this gives a collective boost to confidence and shared learning. (McHale 2012, personal communication)

A final structured skills audit is provided which assesses interpersonal skills, organisational skills, communication skills, ability to reflect critically, and problem solving skills among others. Students are encouraged to find an unpaid placement if possible, and most

placements consisted of voluntary work with local communities and charities, schools and the student union, as well as some media work.

Context and Methodology

The case study was carried out as part of a larger National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project, *Rethinking final-year projects and dissertations: creative Honours and capstone projects*. The remit for the study was to seek out and investigate innovative practice in project work in a university in the UK or other country, and critically evaluate the teaching methods used within the broader educational context. The Work Based Project at Sheffield Hallam University was selected since work-based learning in humanities is rare and this module has demonstrated that it can stand the test of time.

The module tutor provided the detailed module guide together with 51 'Skills Audit' forms completed by students who were taking the module in the academic year 2010-11 (the questions from the form appear in Appendix 1 below). The students filled in the audit at home in handwriting on the audit form and submitted it as a requirement of the assessment, so this represents a sample of 100%. The questions asked them both about the skills they had gained through the Work Based Project as well as suggestions for improvements to the module. The comments on the forms were coded and placed into categories of significant themes by the researcher. Themes were considered significant where the same issues were brought up a number of times by students, and exceptions to the emerging patterns (if any were present) were given close attention to avoid overgeneralisation.

In addition, a follow-up questionnaire was designed to discover if students were finding what they learned from the module useful in their current life. It was sent via email to all students who had completed the module in the previous year by the module tutor. The questionnaire was made completely anonymous through being filled in on-line without entering any personal information, and recently graduated students who had taken the module were made aware of the questionnaire by the module tutor sending them a link. The questionnaire questions appear in Appendix 2 below, and although there were only ten responses in the end they were informative. A previous case-study of the module

(McHale 2010) was also taken into consideration. Finally, the module tutor was consulted via email and in person to provide reflections on particular issues and assure the accuracy of the observations. The module tutor confirmed that she is willing for the case study to be published and to be named.

Results and Discussion

The following discussion is organised by perspectives on work-based learning taken from the general literature, some of which are about professional subjects such as nursing, or whole degree programmes that take place within workplaces. The statements are re-considered in the context of humanities work-based projects, with illustrative evidence drawn from the Sheffield Hallam module.

Work-based learning builds students' confidence

There is strong evidence in the literature that one of the most common benefits of work-based learning is an increase in confidence, and that this is something that students value highly (Clouder 2009, Hughes 2001, Lester & Costley 2010, Stephenson & Saxton 2005). This is borne out by the evidence from the Sheffield Hallam module – 38 of the 51 students (75%) who filled out skills audit forms explicitly mention a gain in confidence as a result of the module (at some point in their response to the 'skills audit' in Appendix 1). Clouder (2009: 289) credits the responsibility given to students for the increase in confidence: 'the extent to which students are allowed responsibility in the workplace appears to have a fundamental impact on their perceptions of personal efficacy ... without doubt, responsibility does educate'. It is, of course, crucial that the students are given the right level of responsibility, since Hughes (2001) describes how too much responsibility can be oppressive – something that was not reported by any of the Sheffield Hallam students. The tutor comments that:

I want to stress the importance of the tutorial in areas of potential risk such as students being overloaded with responsibility. Tutorials give vital guidance for students to identify parameters of their project. There can also be interventions by the tutor to ensure safeguarding issues are dealt with by the university. (McHale 2012, personal communication)

The detail of the skills audit forms confirms that some students associated their increase in confidence with the responsibility they were given, for example having to teach lessons or give presentations, and one student wrote 'A leadership role has helped boost my confidence ... as there is a lot of responsibility'. Other factors that students described as increasing their confidence were 'pushing the boundaries of my comfort zone', 'working and cooperating with people ... from different backgrounds and cultures', dealing with 'unfamiliar professionals over the phone', 'working with others that I haven't ... known before', 'airing opinions and ideas which I knew were opposing to others', and approaching 'new and different experiences'. Clearly, being exposed to the challenge of dealing with a wide variety of new situations beyond their comfort zone and finding that they could deal appropriately with those situations contributed to the reported increase in confidence. Three students, writing in the follow-up questionnaire, also mentioned the role of reflection and the learning diary itself in increasing confidence, e.g., 'I knew that every day I worked on the project was a good day but when I wrote about it that evening and reflected on my skills I would think the day was even more of a success.'

Another aspect that helps with confidence is the flexible nature of the Learning Contracts that students enter into, which can be adapted to meet the specific needs of students. The tutor comments that:

Meeting the increasing needs of students and their Learning Contracts (for those with disabilities/specific needs) the Word Based Project has the flexibility to allow for inclusive practice. We can create bespoke projects to accommodate students' needs without recourse to alternative assessments. Students with medical conditions, aspergers, anxieties or caring responsibilities have all succeeded in completing a WBP though early tutorials, appropriate shared decisions, and tapping into available advice and opportunities. (McHale 2012, personal communication)

Work-based learning builds a wide range of skills and attributes

Lee et al (2010: 564) describe how with work-based learning, students 'experience a greater diversity of learning activities in a learner-managed role. ... The resulting complexity, variety and control of workplace environments lead to increased self-reported learning outcomes ... as students are introduced to real life practices'. This is certainly true for the Sheffield Hallam module, where students describe a wide range of attributes and

skills that they developed through the module. For example, in the follow-up questionnaire, one graduate wrote:

The skills I developed include team work, confidence and public speaking as well as improving my organization, communication, interpersonal and meeting skills. Of course, I am finding all these skills useful in my current life.

Table 1 below summarises the range of skills and attributes that students described as having been gained through the module in the 51 'Skills Audit' forms (Appendix 1). All skills and attributes that students mention they gained anywhere in the form were included in the analysis, although repetitions of the same skill mentioned in the same student's form were just counted once. The names of the skills were drawn out from the data using the exact words of the student rather than being interpreted and coded into categories by the researcher.

Table 1. Self-reported skills and attributes from skills audit

Skill/attribute	Reported by no of students (of 51)	Percentage
Communication	43	84
Confidence	38	75
Organisation	33	65
Time-management	22	43
Independence	14	27
Problem-solving	10	20
Research	10	20
Teamwork	10	20
Leadership	5	10
Prioritising	5	10
Reflection	4	8
Caring	2	4
Planning	2	4
Positive-thinking-self-esteem	2	4
Active-listening	1	2
Adaptability	1	2
Classroom-management	1	2
Commitment	1	2
Creativity	1	2

Decision-making	1	2
Flexibility	1	2
Initiative	1	2
IT-skills	1	2
Management	1	2
Professionalism	1	2
Reliability	1	2
Responsibility	1	2
Target-setting	1	2

The most frequently mentioned skill was ‘communication’, which included a number of aspects including interpersonal skills, writing, appreciating other points of view, networking, encouraging others, talking with people from different backgrounds, presentation skills, advice giving, phone skills, and email writing. Importantly, all students except for two out of the 51 felt that some or all of the skills and attributes they gained were relevant and useful to their whole degree experience. For example, one student wrote that ‘as...people rely on me I have been more productive...which has seen a vast improvement in my other module grades’ and another wrote ‘my confidence has grown throughout ... [I now have more] confidence in seminars to voice my opinion and work with others.’ Lecturers who have concerns about students lacking the confidence to express themselves in class, lacking the communication skills to give engaging presentations, or lacking organisation and time-management skills for getting their assignments done on time may be heartened by how so many useful skills and attributes appear to be gained in what is just a single module.

There is a question as to whether the skills gained in work-based learning are just generic skills (essential as these are), or whether students use or develop knowledge and skills from their subject discipline. Students were asked about this in the follow-up questionnaire, and eight out of ten described a connection with their subject-specific knowledge and skills. Responses included the following:

I was able to apply many skills from my English Language degree, such as compiling secondary information when writing the handbook.

As my placement was in an English Department I was able to not only gain skills of working in an educational environment but also enhance my subject specific skills.

It enabled me to apply the research skills I had acquired during my time at University

The modules in children's literature and language acquisition were great for background knowledge. By having this basic knowledge I was able to fully understand and I hope apply different theories of how children interact with reading.

There clearly can be a connection with the subject discipline, then, particularly if the placement is in an educational setting, although other workplaces may be less effective in this respect. One history student whose job was teaching elderly people how to use the internet felt that this was entirely unrelated to subject specific skills.

Work-based learning can be instrumental

Lester and Costley (2010: 569) describe a number of critiques of work-based learning. One of the most important is that it can 'be disempowering vis-à-vis conventional university learning by trapping the learner into an employer-driven or instrumental agenda'. Also that the learner-managed focus in work-based programmes 'can be turned around into a form of self-disciplining, where individuals are inducted into managing themselves according to an employer-based or more broadly economically-focused agenda'.

Some work-based learning practitioners try to distance themselves from the instrumentalism of specific vocational training, making a distinction between learning *for* employment and learning *in* employment. Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2011: 25), for example, describe vocational training as 'competence based', i.e., learning the specific skills necessary to competently carry out a particular job, which they contrast with work-based learning, which is 'about learning, not training ... becoming an independent learner, capable of critical and reflective thinking ... in different situations'. It is the reflective and social processes which enable work-based learning to develop higher level learning. As Yeo (2008: 321) points out, 'learning is intensified when participants engage in personal reflection and collaborative investigation to illuminate problem solutions' and 'It is through the constant questioning of underlying issues that existing problems hold a great many learning points for the problem solver' (Yeo 2008: 317).

The tutor for the Sheffield Hallam module describes how instrumentalist or unduly employer led agendas are resisted in the module through making it a 'project' rather than a 'work placement':

I always emphasise the Project word as I feel it suggests student ownership rather than being 'placed' passively in a prearranged placement. The emphasis is then on the student to negotiate rather than expect everything to be arranged by the employer – placing the locus of control on the side of the student. (McHale 2012, personal communication)

In addition, narrow profit-orientated agendas are less of an issue since the overwhelming majority of students opt to work for educational or community organisations, making it more a form of community-based learning. Community-based learning 'enhances student competencies by linking theoretical concepts and real-world practice within a changing environment' and 'equally benefits students, educational institutions and the community through measured service learning outcomes, academic outcomes and civic engagement' (Lee et al 2010: 563). If students were working for commercially oriented corporations then potentially narrow, instrumentalist agendas of employers may be more problematic, increasing the importance of critical reflective skills.

Work-based learning involves critical reflection

As described above, reflection is one of the key elements that distinguishes work-based learning from training or the kind of informal learning that goes on in the workplace anyway. However, if reflection is not carefully framed by the higher education institution then there is a danger that 'terms such as self-direction and reflection can be subverted to produce an unchallenging, problem-solving type of learning that lacks a genuinely critical dimension' (Lester & Costley 2010, 569). Valentin (1999) argues that it is essential that work-based learning 'as well as focusing on the development of individual competence for work, allows space to challenge dominant organisational ideological assumptions and practices'. Giroux (1989: 155) describes the aim of reflection as enabling students 'to locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as actors in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life'.

The module guide for the Sheffield Hallam Work Based Project places a strong emphasis on reflection, with the 3000 word 'Reflective Learning Diary' being central to the

assessment. Importantly, the guide encourages not just reflection but critical reflection. The guide instructs students to reflect on academic aspects of their work, on the skills involved, on their own and others' behaviour, and, importantly 'the ethical, social, cultural and institutional contexts of the work' including 'constantly monitoring the 'rightness' of what we do, are asked to do, and ask others to do' as well as 'questioning institutional or individual practice when necessary' (Module-guide 2011).

Interestingly, despite reflection being so central to the process of the module, only 4 of 51 students explicitly mentioned reflection skills when describing the skills they had gained. There is little doubt that students developed skills in reflection, but the lack of comment on them may mean that they do realise how important reflection is as a skill for study, work and life. The follow-up questionnaire asked students to comment specifically on the contribution of the reflective diary to the learning experience. Eight of ten were very positive, for example:

I was able to evaluate the skills I developed during the project, which was really useful. I think that without this element of the module, I would not have found it such a worthwhile experience.

Writing a reflective diary was one of the important parts of the project as it gave me the chance to comment on both good and bad experiences I had during my placement and also reflect upon them. I also learned how to find solutions to any problems I encountered and in that way become better.

In both the skills audit forms and the questionnaire, the students described the benefit of reflection and the learning diary in terms of the contribution to problem solving, recording the achievement of outcomes, and providing evidence of personal development and skills development over time. The module tutor confirmed that there was a strong emphasis on the personal skills development side of reflection, but that some students did reflect at the ethical level of critically examining their own place within the organisation, and the organisation's place within the society. In one particular learning diary that the module tutor shared (with permission), a student critically examined the internal social organisation of the institution they were working for in relation to its impact on the people it served, and gave a series of practical recommendations for improvement. In a separate evaluation (provided by the module tutor), a graduate who went on to do a PGCE wrote that:

The reflection that the Work Based Project requires of you has been by far the biggest help to me to date. As I write this, I am taking time out of writing up an assignment for my PGCE course, which is based on critically reflecting on a scheme of work that I created and taught during my first placement.

Conclusion

In the humanities, work-based learning tends to be treated cautiously and there is sometimes uncertainty about whether to welcome the stranger in. My examination of the skills audit forms, course materials and follow-up questionnaires of the Sheffield Hallam Work-based Project have left me in no doubt that this is an example of a successful module where students have a positive experience and feel that they gain a great deal in terms of personal and professional development. The confidence, organisation skills, independence, communication and time management skills that students describe as gaining through the module are potentially of great benefit to both their on-going degree and future life.

The evidence from Sheffield Hallam suggests that work-placed learning can provide an excellent opportunity for students to gain skills and attributes that are important for academic study and life and which complement traditional ways of gaining discipline specific skills rather than competing with them.

There are a few aspects that are important to keep in mind for other universities that wish to introduce similar work-based learning modules in addition to the dissertation. Firstly, Yeo (2008: 319) raises the issue that 'learning outcomes concerning reflective and social knowledge are often assessed inappropriately due to the complexity of the problems and the lack of experience of the ... facilitators'. Sheffield Hallam has a specific post 'Senior Lecturer in work-based learning in the humanities' filled by a highly experienced educator who has a background in education, community education, outreach, and careers guidance. Other humanities departments may not have staff who specialise in the area of work-based learning, so some professional development may be necessary. The second issue is that as 'the workplace is not structured with learning in mind, it can be hard to integrate theory and practice' (Clouder 2009: 290). This makes the framing of the experience and the mentoring of students extremely important: 'a one-to-one relationship between student and mentor ... has been found to have a profound influence on the quality of the ... learning experience' (Clouder 2009: 290). Depending on how the experience is framed, work-based learning can 'be purely instrumental' or 'highly developmental, particularly when it is linked to a personally-valued purpose and engaged with critically and reflectively' (Lester & Costley: 563). Encouraging students to critically

reflect on their skills, personal development, and also their 'awareness of the ethical knowledge underpinning practice' (Moore 2007: 161) is part of the learning process in work-based learning. This reflection could extend to critical examination of the student's place within the organisation, the social relationships that make up the organisation, and the role of the organisation in society.

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Appendix 1

Skills Audit (created by module tutor)

1. Examples of how the Work Based Project has developed my: attributes ... strategies ... skills ...
2. The skills developed through the project relate to my whole degree experience by ...
3. To improve the module the tutor needs to: Stop ... Start ... Continue ...
4. The skills and experience I can transfer to the work after graduation are ...
5. My advice to new students starting this module is...
6. Thinking back on the course, how would *you* describe Work Based Learning in the Humanities in the new prospectus?

Appendix 2

Follow-up questionnaire. (created by researcher)

Question 1: Which course did you study?

Question 2: Please tell us briefly what your project involved

Question 3: Did you have a chance to apply any skills or knowledge from your subject discipline in carrying out the project? And did it help develop subject specific knowledge or skills in any way?

Question 4: What other (not subject related) skills and knowledge did you gain through the project? And are you finding these useful in your current employment/life?

Question 5: Please describe how you felt about writing a reflective learning diary, and the ways in which it helped your project become a deeper learning experience.

Question 6: In what ways do you think this project helped you develop as a person?