

Competence or Capability: Work-based Learning & Problem-based Learning

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Abstract

There has been increased pressure upon academic institutions to further develop Work Based Learning (WBL) within the curriculum. Media practice education already includes a significant amount of Work Related Learning (WRL) although perhaps this is not always made evident in course documents or through specific approaches to the delivery of courses. This paper will begin by reviewing the published definitions and requirements of WBL and look at some of the issues that arise in relation to media practice education. Working with SMEs¹ for example, to deliver WBL can be problematic and is not always completely beneficial to students as an experience of the work place. This raises issues particular to media practice education. Using 'Live Projects' to simulate WBL, can perhaps offer a more supported and effective learning experience within the context of Higher Education. The paper will look at potential ways that the methodology of Problem Based Learning could be utilised to work with and assess 'Live Projects', offering guidance on moving from 'project based' to 'problem based' project work.

Introduction

This paper will look at Work-based Learning (WBL) in the context of developing a Foundation Degree in Media Production & Development at University College Chichester for launch in September 2005 (now indefinitely postponed). WBL is a central component of a Foundation Degree as it is for many other courses at a range of levels. There is however some confusion as to exactly what the scope and meaning of the term WBL might be. Skillset (the Sector Skills Council for Media) have not produced clear guidelines setting out their understanding of the term WBL. Those they have produced seem contradictory and at odds with the academic project with which we are engaged in Higher Education and do not seem to be aligned with documents produced by QAA or the DfES, documents that in themselves seem confusing and contradictory. In fact it appears that the whole notion of WBL is riven with contradiction and confusion.

There are also significant problems associated with the delivery of WBL within an industry dominated by Sole Traders, Small to Medium Enterprises (SME's) and Micro businesses that make delivery of WBL a crucial issue in the design of a Foundation Degree or in media practice in general. One solution to many of these problems might be to utilise 'Live Briefs' or 'Live Projects'. Here employers are directly involved in the setting up, running and assessment of student projects. However this approach is very different from that set out in the Skillset framework documents. The question is then, are 'Live Projects' an acceptable way forward for integrating 'Work Related Learning'² into the curriculum?

¹ Small to Medium Enterprises

² With Work Related Learning; work experience; job shadowing; case studies and the like are embedded into the curriculum along with other aspects of the course which are contextualised by

A blanket refusal by the SSC to engage with HE to develop and deliver WBL is not necessarily a productive approach. There is a lot of good practice in HE that could be acknowledged and expertise that needs to be recognised. The aim of this paper is to highlight some of this good practice and initiate a discussion that might go some way towards resolving some of the differences between the academic and SSC positions. In particular the paper will review the way in which Problem-based Learning (PBL) might be an approach that could address problems associated with delivery of WBL outcomes in an HE context.

The Context: Employers say that graduates are not “job ready”

The DfES³ state that WBL should not be confused with Work Placements suggesting the following definitions should be applied:

Work Placement = an experience of work for a short duration;

WBL = a structured learning experience leading to accreditation;

From this we can determine that WBL should be understood as ‘learning through work’, usually ‘at work’ where “partnership” is a fundamental aspect in the promotion of life-long learning, and the development of work place skills⁴. The problem for HE is that in an industry dominated by SME’s, this could mean that where there are no local large enterprises with whom to build a relationship these institutions are effectively excluded from delivery of WBL. How do you for example persuade a sole trader, SME or Micro Business that they really need to get involved with education; that there will be real benefits to their business? How do we as educators incentivise employers to work with us within the constraints of Higher Education institutional practices?

The definitive statement from Skillset suggests that WBL ‘must take place in the work place not an HE or FE environment’⁵, that there should be a significant work place context along the lines of an apprenticeship or sandwich course. This sets up a series of problems for HEI’s working outside of the major production areas or away from the BBC or ITV company headquarters. It also begs the question as to whether HEI’s should be doing the employers jobs for them. Should we really be responsible for training their staff and adopting the burden of cost that comes with it?

In contrast to Skillset’s ‘competency’ approach to learning and teaching the DfES statement⁶ on the assessment of WBL talks in terms of:

CAPABILITY - includes underpinning knowledge and understanding and development of personal skills and relevant qualities;

And;

PERFORMANCE - includes the skills and qualities they demonstrate in practice;

While the Skillset produced National Occupational Standards (NOS) have provided us with a useful guideline for developing competency based education

the development of work place skills or experience such as presentations, live projects, pitching, report writing etc.... (For further information see the QCA Framework for Work Related Learning).

³ DfES Guide: How to Develop a Foundation Degree

⁴ DfES Guide: How to Develop a Foundation Degree

⁵ Skillset Foundation Degree Radio Production Framework 2004

⁶ DfES Guide: How to Develop a Foundation Degree

this approach is perhaps not appropriate at degree level. The problem with the NOS is that it is:

“largely based upon narrow definitions of specific tasks and in outcome terms on identifiable and tightly defined performance criteria” (Stephenson 2003 p88)

Where as personal capabilities “such as courage, risk taking, intuition, sharing, acceptance of personal responsibility, flexibility, initiative, self confidence and values” (Stephenson 2003 p88) are not recognised and not assessed even though it is these basic capabilities that make for ‘job ready’ graduates.

So we find ourselves presented by Skillset with a terminology that restricts what we do as media practice educators to a narrow definition, potentially excluding many institutions and many aspects of existing good practice. Good practice that is clearly producing ‘job ready’ graduates despite the industry’s protestations to the contrary. We are left wondering then, how to proceed and in what terms we should frame the delivery and assessment of WBL.

What is Problem-based Learning and can it help?

PBL can perhaps offer a guiding principal by providing a language for talking about practice. A language that offers the possibility of managing and assessing the kind of learning that goes on in a ‘Live Project’ or simulated WBL context⁷; a language that describes what we already do well and assists us to do it better. PBL can be thought of as:

“...both a curriculum and a process. The curriculum consists of carefully selected and designed problems that demand from the learner acquisition of critical knowledge, problem solving proficiency, self-directed learning strategies, and team participation skills. The process replicates the commonly used systemic approach to resolving problems or meeting challenges that are encountered in life and career” (Barrows & Kelson 1993)⁸

Savin-Baden suggests that PBL should be thought of as an “educational strategy or even as a philosophy rather than merely as a teaching approach” (Savin-Baden 2004 p5). She specifically explores the distinction between:

PROBLEM SOLVING - linear exploration of subject which is tutor led and knowledge based;

And:

PROBLEM BASED - problem scenarios are utilised in a way that encourages students to engage with and manage their own learning (Savin-Baden 2004 p3);

This refers very much to a focus on the **PROCESS** rather than the **PRODUCTS** of learning/knowledge (Savin-Baden 2004 p4). PBL is founded upon an open-ended and ill-structured problem or situation that has no ‘right’ answer. The tutor is responsible for facilitating learning strategies and the students are active participants and critically involved enquirers who own their own learning

⁷ Though the word simulation is forbidden by Skillset in the context of WBL this doctrinaire didacticism seems out of place and in opposition to much work on the subject. Skillset’s refusal to countenance any approach to WBL that utilises this principal seems unworkable and unsupported.

⁸ <http://www.samford.edu/pbl/definitions.html>

experience. Who “...use reasoning abilities to manage and solve complex problems” (Savin-Baden 2004 p11).

Thus students use intuition to solve set problems in a manner that mirrors play activity (Stephenson 2003) and so has the benefit of being fun, while involving a significant degree of exploratory or experiential learning. Isn't this how we learn in the industry – “on the job”? Isn't this at the heart of media practice education?

One of the varieties of approach discussed by Savin-Baden includes instances where students may meet with a client in some form of simulated format that allows for a brief to be given and students to engage in a free discussion or enquiry with that client to establish the nature of the brief/problem (Savin-Baden 2004 p5). In a similar way the key criteria for a Live Project should be that employers are included in the designing of briefs, at the diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment stages. PBL problems must be ‘authentic’ not academically generated, and they must reflect real life or students don't engage as deeply with the activity. This need is synonymous with the need for WBL to reflect the real world of professional media practice.

Refocus & Reframe: process as outcome

PBL can help us offer the following challenges to students:

- Encourage students to engage in independent critical enquiry;
- To manage their own resources;
- To take ownership for their own learning.

These aspects might seem familiar to you because in many ways this is what we already do in media practice. In fact some PBL practioners do regard project based learning as synonymous with PBL. Perhaps the difference is that we, as media practice educators don't frame what we do as PBL and perhaps we don't assess in terms of capabilities. In my limited experience we tend to focus on assessing the end product, using what has sometimes been referred to as ‘connoisseur assessment’ where the focus is on the end product and not the process. The nature of WBL requires a movement away from product towards process and PBL perhaps might some insights into how we could accomplish this.

Clearly project based work of one kind or another is central to the concept of a ‘Live Project’ and the ‘Comparison Table’ (Savin-Baden 2003 p19) below usefully sets out some clear distinctions between ‘project based’ and ‘problem based’ working. You may already be using a combination of the criteria below to deliver media practice projects. In fact it is highly likely that you are already using PBL in some ‘hybrid’ form or another.

Project-Based Learning	Problem-Based Learning
Outcome requires students to produce some kind of artefact for assessment	Outcome is <i>open ended</i> and not necessarily subject to assessment
Assessment by a ‘crit’ or some other form of connoisseur assessment	<i>Peer or self assessment</i> is used, by reflection on action or other student centred approach

The tutor supervises	The tutor <i>facilitates</i>
Students are required to produce a solution or strategy that solves the problem	Solving the problem may be part of the process however the focus is on the process of <i>problem management</i>
Tutor led curriculum within the life span of the project	<i>Students determine</i> the kind of learning they wish to undertake perhaps utilising budgeted resources
Students come together in groups for the period of the project	Students form <i>learning teams</i> for the duration of the course and may undertake many problem-based scenarios together (thus they have to work through difficulties)
Students are given structured projects that are linked to pre-determined outcomes	<i>Real-Life problems</i> may be set in advance but outcomes are not pre-determined

(Table from Savin-Baden 2003 p19)

Preliminary research into the topic would suggest that PBL has a lot to offer in the reconceptualisation of media production projects as “Live Projects” or “Live Briefs”. It gives us a useful methodology for looking at how we can shift the focus of assessment away from the final product and towards the process of production. PBL provides us with a framework for involving employers in the process of delivery and it puts the onus for learning onto the students. It establishes a principal where CAPABILITY rather than COMPETENCE becomes the benchmark for success.

In their Radio Production Framework⁹ Skillset define the three principles of a Foundation Degree in documents as:

- More relevant application of skills development;
- Exposure to real-life working problems and situations;
- Balance between practical and interpersonal skills:

The QAA Qualification Benchmark Statement states that skills and knowledge need to be ‘applied in a work context’¹⁰. So far then we could argue that ‘Live Projects’ based on a PBL approach would meet these requirements.

This however is the point of departure. Skillset’s detailed and extensive NOS focus on a competencies approach telling us exactly what it is that employees might be expected to do in the work place in clearly delineated technical terms. It is this difficulty of reconciling the NOS knowledge statements with the QAA benchmark statements that is to be at the heart of this problem. In trying to reconcile the two approaches an antagonism arises between the “operational competence of the workplace and the academic competence of disciplinary knowledge” (Onyx 2003 p126).

As an academic discourse PBL leads us towards an assessment strategy that reflects what the professional does in their practice, which is largely process-based professional activity, underpinned by appropriate knowledge, skills and

⁹ Skillset Foundation Degree Radio Production Framework 2004

¹⁰ QAA Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark Statement 2004

attitudes (CAPABILITY). Stephenson suggests that the “defining characteristic of capability is the capacity for autonomous learning and development within the context of change”. While the Davies Review¹¹ defines enterprise capability:

“as the capability to handle uncertainty and respond positively to change, to create and implement new ideas and new ways of doing things, to make reasonable risk/reward assessments and act upon them in one’s personal and working life”.

DfES¹² statements suggest that some of the ways in which Capability and Performance can be assessed are through projects, reflective reports, portfolios, case studies (amongst others, many of which we already use to assess student participation in media practice projects).

All of these tools fit well with the PBL approach, and fit well with the academic project of media practice education. Clearly there is a need to involve employers in the process of setting up and delivering ‘Live Projects’ and projects need to reflect a real world business context. It would seem however that the kind of skills defined by the term capability can be developed within an academic setting as part of a Work Related Learning approach and that perhaps the notion of Work Based Learning should be left in the domain of employers.

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Some URLs that provide a good starting point for further investigation:

<http://www.hss.coventry.ac.uk/pbl/index.htm>

<http://www.samford.edu/pbl/index.html>

<http://www.careers.ncl.ac.uk/realworld/>

<http://www.workrelatedlearning.biz/>

¹¹ Davies Review of Enterprise and the Economy in Education 2002

¹² DfES Guide: How to Develop a Foundation Degree