Out of the comfort zone: enhancing work-based learning about employability through student reflection on work placements.

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiential and reflective work-based learning about employability reported by 26 undergraduate Geography and Environmental Management students on part-time, unpaid work placements. The students' 'reflective essays' show that they framed more of their learning in terms of emotional challenges than in terms of skills, often finding that being pushed out of their 'comfort zone' of skills and social context forced them to be more pro-active, tackle unfamiliar activities and develop emotionally. This reflects a move from understanding employability in terms of skills to understanding employability as integrative, reflective and adapatable. This also emphasises the challenges for HEIs in supporting employability and work-based learning outside the academic zone and the need for more innovative ways to integrate off-campus work-based learning with on-campus reflection in future.

Keywords: employability, work-based learning, work-related learning, work experience, placements, reflection

Introduction

Graduate employability is a key goal for students and higher education institutions (HEIs). Although graduate recruitment by major UK employers grew in 2010 and 2011, so did the number of students graduating, thus increasing competition for jobs: employers in the main recruitment 'round' reporting receiving 19% more applications for graduate jobs by December 2011 than in 2010 (High Fliers 2012, pp.5-6). Yet there remains little consensus in the literature as to how to define graduate employability (e.g. Clark 2011; GEES no date; Pegg *et al*. 2012; Yorke & Knight 2006), especially internationally (Rooney *et al.* 2006), and little evaluation of what works best for different students (Pegg *et al*. 2012).

In this paper, I evaluate the diverse experiential learning reported by undergraduate Geography and Environmental Management students on part-time, unpaid work placements in the University of Hull in 2011-12. Using 26 indepth reflective essays written by the students, I argue that, to my surprise, the students framed much of their learning and development in terms of their emotional challenges and gains, rather than skills,. They wrote about being pushed out of their 'comfort zone' of skills, knowledge and social context, forcing them to be, or at least recognise the need to be, more pro-active, to tackle unfamiliar activities and ideas and thus to develop emotionally and engage more fully in their work experience. I show how this student perspective reflects the current turn away from employability skills to 'whole-person' models of experiential learning that see employability as integrative, reflective and

transitional. Such a model of a more flexible, adaptable and open-minded graduate goes beyond some of the more mechanical definitions of employability that tend to dominate the literature. I argue that it also offers a greater challenge to HEIs for teaching and supporting employability learning in the future, especially how to better integrate learning in the workplace with learning in the HE environment.

From employability skills to integrative learning

The literature contains a great deal about graduate employability and I do not intend to review it all – others have already done that (e.g. Arrowsmith *et al*. 2011; Pegg *et al*. 2012). However, I note that employability is often expressed as lists of skills or attributes (e.g. Hills et al. 2003; Whalley *et al*. 2011). For example, the UK employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI 2012, p.23) defined 'employability skills' as, first, 'a positive attitude' to work and also: self-management; teamworking; business and customer awareness; problem solving; communication and literacy; numeracy; using information technology. The CBI also found that employers were most satisfied with their graduate recruits in terms of their more technical skills such as use of IT, English, numeracy and literacy and least satisfied with their more social skills such as teamworking, self-management, cultural awareness, business awareness and foreign languages.

A more academic approach was taken by the UK's Higher Education Academy in the USEM model (Yorke and Knight 2006, p.5), which included: understanding about students' degree subject; skills or 'skilful practice'; students' theories and beliefs about their own efficacy; and metacognition in reflecting on their own learning. More recently (Pegg *et al.* 2012), the HEA has turned to Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) CareerEDGE model as a broader, more student-friendly model of employability that echoes USEM in including degree subject knowledge, generic skills, self-efficacy and reflection and evaluation, but also includes emotional intelligence, personal experience, self-esteem and self-confidence. Ideally, these diverse definitions of employability and skill lists could be used by different groups (employers, HEIs, students, parents) to communicate with each other and to integrate teaching, learning and recruitment practice more successfully (e.g. Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007; Pegg *et al*. 2012, p.20).

However, the complexity and skills-based focus of such models is only one way in which to conceptualise employability. An alternative perspective is to see it more as a process of learning and becoming, thus offering potential for more holistic, integrative learning. In his influential book, Kolb (1984, p.141-150) argued that learning progresses in three phases: *acquisition* as a child, *specialization* via education or career as a young adult and finally, and most importantly, *integration* to address the conflict between social status or career achievement and personal fulfilment in later life. Integrative learning is synthetic, holistic and strategic, connecting together diverse experiences, and can thus only truly happen in post-adolescent development as people mature. By implication, integrative learning is the highest, latest and hardest form of learning, but essential for graduate employability and longer term career success.

More importantly, such learning depends on two elements (Kolb 1984, p.41-43): the experience of work and subsequent analysis to properly comprehend that experience and to apply it to future work. This suggests that students need at least some experience of employment to learn about becoming employable, because it is the often uncomfortable and unfamiliar newness of the work experience that is part of prompting learning, and that they must also reflect on that experience. The challenge for HEIs is that, although we can help with or provide space and support for reflection, we rely on external providers for the initial experience and cannot 'teach' employability alone; rather, experiential learning requires direct work experience to be pedagogically "most effective" (Pegg *et al.* 2012, p.44). Mason et

al. (2009, p.23) have demonstrated this empirically in a study of whether graduates obtain employment in graduate-level jobs within six months of graduation, concluding that although "structured work experience has clear positive effects... there is no evidence that the emphasis given by university departments to the teaching, learning and assessment of employability skills has a significant independent effect on either of the labour market outcomes considered here."

In other words, it is the students' experience of a non-academic work environment that correlates with greater likelihood of their subsequent graduate employment, not other forms of employability teaching that they encounter in campus-based modules (Cranmer 2006).[1] As Hills et al (2003, page 223, emphasis added) put it, work-based learning involves "learning *in a work environment,*" rather than outside it. That does not mean that HEIs should no longer bother to 'teach' employability; rather, HEIs should concentrate on developing students' skills and confidence and also on offering space/time for students to actively reflect on their (external) experience of employability, as Kolb (1984) recommends, and as well as helping students to experience employment off-campus.

Echoing Kolb, Pegg *et al*. (2012, p.9) conclude from their literature review that "the ability to articulate learning and raising confidence, self-esteem and aspirations seem to be more significant in developing graduates than a narrow focus on skills and competences." Consequently, they argue, 'employability' is now understood by both employers and students much more broadly than merely skills; rather, employability is "a process of 'becoming' related to graduate identity" (ibid., p.20). Arrowsmith *et al.* (2011, p.368-9) also refer to flexibility and adaptability as 'personal attributes' that go beyond 'technical competences', defining 'employment capability' as "the sum of geographical knowledge, technical competencies and personal attributes, assembled in appropriate ways." This whole-person, integrative learning approach is implicit also in Brockbank *et al*.'s (2002, p.6) definition of reflective learning as where "learners are active individuals, wholly present, engaging with others, and open to challenge."

This is not necessarily new – twenty years ago, Schön (1991, p.45-9) argued that the attitudes and skills that are now needed in the professions are not the technical skills of standardised, codified and specialised knowledge, but the nonstandardised, diverse, adaptable, artistic, intuitive, tacit and soft skills of negotiation, questioning and experimentation, or what we might call in a more modern vernacular 'thinking outside the box.' In this sense, and particularly in the currently straightened economic climate, graduate employability should be seen explicitly as about more than skills, about developing a whole, employable *person* who integrates skills, qualities, values and relationships - what has been called 'graduateness' - with a personal history through the embodied experience of work.

Methodology

I now turn to the reflective essays to demonstrate how such whole-person learning is experienced and understood by Geography and Environmental Management students. Like other HEIs, the University of Hull seeks to enhance its graduates' employability in principle (see http://www2.hull.ac.uk/administration/pdp-employability/employability/employabilityathull.aspx) and is also developing a co-curricular award to recognise skills and experiences gained by students outside modules as part of this effort. Hull's Careers & Employability Service offers strong support and diverse

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[1] High Fliers (2012, p.12) reports that graduate employers expect to fill a third of their 2012 vacancies with "undergraduates who have had previous work experience with their organisations," reinforcing the importance of work experience for future employment.

opportunities for students to develop employability, as well as an optional module called 'Careers Management Skills'. Apart from these activities, employability support is devolved to individual departments, which vary greatly in their approaches: some provide paid internships or specialist training through industrial collaboration, others focus on employability through teamwork projects and fieldwork exercises within campus-based modules.

Since 1997, Hull's Department of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences has been running unpaid, part-time work placements hosted by large private companies, local authorities, schools, social enterprises and charities. Over 200 students have participated so far. Organised as 20-credit modules, these placements require students to write a report on their placement that is marked by University staff, although placement supervisors also provide feedback, and a reflective essay that is marked only by University staff. In 2011-12, 26 undergraduate students took a placement module as part of the final year of their Geography or Environmental Management degrees. All 26 were asked if they would consent to their reflective essays being used in a writing project and none objected; indeed, several expressed support for the idea and also volunteered to help with publication. Their essays have been anonymised using letter codes A, B, C etc..

I should first outline the instructions given to students about writing reflective essays, because this may have affected their output. The essays have a notional word limit of 1,500 words, although students often write a little more, and guidance is given in a one-hour class some weeks before the deadline, using readings such as Schön (1991) and Moon (2004) as well as a discussion of short 'reflective comments' submitted by the students in advance. In class, I emphasised that there were no 'right' answers or structure or content for the essays; rather, the important thing was to reflect, analyse and evaluate their experiences and consider how they would tackle the same problems or situations in future. Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle was also used to prompt class discussion.

Writing reflective diaries and journals has been correlated with better academic performance and "higher-level learning outcomes" amongst psychology students by Mayo (2003, p.243). Certainly, marks for the reflective essays in 2011-12 varied from 75% to 55% and were often higher than for the main report, marks for which went below 50%. Students also tackled their essays in different ways, from descriptive accounts of the work done in the placement, to highly reflective accounts drawing on experiences outside placements and theories of reflective learning (e.g. Gibbs 1988; Kolb 1984) to guide their analysis or structure their writing. [2]

In this paper, I use these reflective essays methodologically as qualitative, indepth data, shaped by the participant with some guidance from the module leader. The essays are thus similar in content to the diaries and learning journals analysed by others (e.g. Dummer et al. 2008; Mayo 2003), although two features are notable. First, the essays were written with hindsight, because they were submitted at the end of the placement, often 2-3 weeks after the last placement visit made by the student, although there were some exceptions. Second, the essays were written to gain credit and thus may have over-emphasised positive learning, because students felt (despite staff advice) that this was expected of them.

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[2] The 'reflective essay' had previously been called a 'reflective diary' or 'log', but had been changed because of the tendency of students, especially the weaker writers (noted also by Dummer et al. 2008), to submit a very descriptive, chronological, visit-by-visit account and thus fail to identify broader patterns of learning.

In providing feedback on an early draft of this paper, one student wrote that students "were too scared to express their true opinion in case word got back to the staff where they worked or not to offend your module... I think there is a lack of honesty in many of the essays... [Students] 'bigged' themselves up." Here, the effect of the social norms of academic writing and marking may well have affected the truthfulness of the data, although we could of course criticise other qualitative methods, such as interviewing, for being similarly influenced by participants' notions of what is socially acceptable.

I should also emphasise that most of these placements were set up by me in response to student requests, e.g. to work in an office, in outdoor conservation or in renewable energy. However, around a quarter to a third - it varied over time - were set up by the students themselves, through family contacts or cold-calling organisations. I note in what follows if the learning experience that resulted seemed different because the placements were 'self-found' or not, although in some cases the difference was blurred, e.g. where I suggested contact names but the student did all the approaching and negotiating. Of course, these 26 students are themselves self-selected, making for a chicken-and-egg problem because, as Mason et al. (2009, p.23) noted, it is difficult to say whether work experience makes students more employable or whether the more employable students are more likely to choose, find and successfully complete work experience opportunities. And the same chicken-and-egg problem occurs when students who have completed placements then perform better in academic assessments (e.g. Mendez and Rona 2010).

The placements undertaken by the 26 students were wide-ranging in both focus and set-up: some involved a regular day in the office each week, some were more sporadic and/or event-focused; sometimes, these differences were produced by students in negotiation with their placement host, but sometimes solely by the host. I emphasise this diversity because, first, students learn in different ways (Kolb 1984, p.97), so offering diverse placement experiences is helpful and, second, the world of work is itself highly variable: graduates may not only move between different jobs during their career, but a single 'job' will itself change over time, as technology, the economy and society change around it. This means that, to be employable in the long term, graduates must be flexible and adaptable, because we are seeing "the shift away from graduates applying for positions for which an idealized mix of employment capabilities exists, towards creating roles for themselves using their employment capabilities" (Arrowsmith *et al.* 2011, p.370). To put this another way, rather than gaining skills to fit into pre-set job roles, graduates will increasingly need to be ready and willing to adapt existing roles and invent new ones to suit new circumstances, again emphasising how the whole-person model is important for employability learning.

Reflecting on placement experiences

I now turn to the reflective essays to show how students wrote about their experience of working in a professional placement. Analysing the data using grounded theory, I was surprised that the codes that emerged about skills - both generic and specific, both explicit and implicit - were less important than those about emotional development. This emphasis on emotionality surprised me, because I had not suggested it to the students and because many of them were on BSc programmes that had so far involved little reflective writing, so I had expected their essays to focus more on skills and knowledge, as much of the literature does. My surprise is therefore a reflection on my own experience of supporting placements and implies no negativity, merely that it was somewhat unexpected.

In particular, coding about being pushed out of their 'comfort zone', out of the familiar context of academic work where they were surrounded by people similar to themselves, dominated the data. For example, choosing to focus more on physical geography aspects of their placement took student H "out of my comfort zone... I now realise how important it is to be pro-active with this type of work, if I was to undertake [it] again I would go out and experience the topic to create scope, rather than over-thinking the subject and potentially becoming stuck again."

Students felt the familiar approach to be an academic one involving "over-thinking", compared to the alternative, less familiar approach, the job-based approach of "going out and doing it." Similarly, student P says that "I chose the placement that I believed would take me most out of my comfort zone into a very corporate/industry environment." And one student, in providing feedback on an earlier version of this paper, said "Too many of the students feel the need (including my own) to write academically - i.e. refer to Gibbs model. Because we have been used to referencing and structuring essays based on academic theory, we thought that we needed to write like this in order to satisfy the marker." Student T also felt that writing the report "meant that I had to move away from the academic writing style I was so comfortable writing in. At the start this was very intimidating."

Stretching oneself beyond the safe, cosy environs of familiar situations and people and taking risks in trying new tasks and approaches is important precisely because it can take the reflective practitioner beyond a possibly narrow or restrictive approach to problem-solving (Thompson and Thompson 2008, p.145). Thus students often perceived themselves to be moving from the zone of comfort to the zone of "scary" (student Z).

What defines the comfort zone? For some students, the comfort zone was a familiar way of writing, an academic style or approach to work which they had developed and had confidence in, due to receiving good marks previously or topics with which they were already familiar from university study or A levels (Student W). Although the essays did mention skills explicitly and implicitly, e.g. writing and teamwork, students often emphasised how learning was prompted by locality and positionality in a process that incorporated but went beyond skills towards integrative learning.

> "At times I felt like I had bitten off more than I could chew... because I did not know anything at all about [the topic]... So I had to learn quickly and enjoyed being out of my comfort zone as this is where you discover who you are as a person and how you thrive in these unknown conditions." "The main lesson I learnt from this experience was that you get out of a project what you put into it.... I could of [sic] easily took [sic] a lazy 'bare minimum' approach to this opportunity but I put my all into it and tested myself by taking myself completely out of my comfort zone and forcing myself to learn new, complex information." (Student K)

For others, the comfort zone was defined not as writing, but as people like themselves in age, inclination and habits. So Student O felt that having to talk to his supervisor during a car journey and work with others on the placement team "made me step out of my comfort zone working with different people who normally I would not associate with." Student Q found herself in the unusual position of managing other people in the form of volunteers who knew even less about the work than she did. "This experience has opened my eyes to... how to manage a small team that previously I would have deemed outside my comfort zone."

In most cases, the discomfort of being 'out of the zone' was perceived negatively at the time, prompting fear, anxiety, reticence and in some cases entire withdrawal from the project. But in the reflective essays, many students later put a positive spin on this, such as Student S who argued that "what I may perceive as bad is usually something that forces me to move out of my comfort zone, or do something that I haven't expected. In hindsight however, I realise what I perceive to be bad at the time has in fact helped me." To succeed, students had to learn to be flexible and adaptable, to be open-minded about unfamiliar situations and people (also students Q and Y).

Passive and active learning

A corollary of how the students perceived dis/comfort in their placement experiences was how they perceived activity in their learning. As already noted, many of the 26 seemed to expect instructions to be given to them, as happens in their 'comfort zone' of undergraduate modules through marking criteria, deadlines, module timetables and especially the classic form of imparting knowledge at university level: the lecture. But these forms of learning are often passive – the student listens and takes notes but rarely does anything active or contributory; the assignments are designed by staff and essay titles or write-up tasks are received by students. Although the placement module instructions emphasised the need for students to take the initiative in developing their placement work, many students seemed to struggle to do this off-campus and their essays showed this by using the passive voice:

- "I was to gather information about..." (student C),

- "I was informed that..." (students A and H),

- "I still wasn't told what exactly my report would consist of" (student D).

Surprisingly, the passive voice was used *even if they had found their own placements*, e.g.:

- "The task given to me... I was asked to..." (student K)

- "I was placed with... The work I was given..." (student J).

Passivity was also shown by students C and D, who mentioned that they did nothing to prepare for their placement until prompted by the start of term, the first class or their first placement meeting. Student D had assumed "further instructions would be issued" and was shocked to find out that other students had already progressed further than he had by taking the initiative to contact their placement supervisors. Similarly, with the benefit of hindsight, students E and F thought that they should have started the whole placement earlier, to sort out sooner what was involved.

In the academic context, a passive approach to other people can be very successful in terms of marks, if supplemented with independent reading and other skills. But in placements, this approach often failed and the student – sometimes a high-achiever in terms of the marks they obtained in other modules – would begin to re-think their approach, often by identifying and changing how they balanced passivity and proactivity. Being more proactive was perceived by the students to be linked with freedom, creativity, the feeling of having agency and influence or efficacy over processes and outcomes, and went beyond skills to a general attitude and approach to challenge.

For example, student W's initial meeting with his placement host left him "confused and discouraged... I was given some background reading about [the topic] but even after further inquiry I was unclear of what exactly I was supposed to do... I expected specified guidance which I did not get... I realised that I have to take my own initiative and start developing the project in my own direction... this stage turned

out to be a lot more creative and a lot less arduous than I first imagined. I had the freedom to develop my report into my own direction."

Conversely, being less proactive and more passive was perceived by the students as being controlled by external events and people. This was detrimental to the experience because it resulted in fatalism and inactivity, as the learner failed to identify and act upon their own agency. In their essays, some students used reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (after Schön) to identify that they had agency, but sometimes they did not, although the reader could infer it.

For example, 'the problem of not asking' cropped up when student A experienced her project changing so that she not longer felt it was "feasible" within a single semester. Upset, the student attributed this partly to the host's "lack of planning" but also to her own "lack of confidence in questioning" the placement staff and because she had assumed they were competent enough to set up a feasible project. In her essay, the student seemed ambivalent about who is in control of her project, to the detriment of her work and peace of mind. Similarly, student C felt that his placement supervisor was very controlling in requiring him to go through her to contact other staff and in issuing "strict instructions" to write a positive report on the organisation, something that the student did not feel able to challenge although he felt that he should have. Student D also said:

> "I had to write an outline [for class] explaining what it was I was doing... I didn't know the answer... so just wrote a generic background... In hindsight, this was perhaps the point where I should have started asking [my supervisors]... I will need to learn to ask questions about things rather than accepting everything at face value... I spent too much time trying not to 'get in the way' and therefore remaining quiet when I should have been asking questions about [the work] that I did not understand very well."

The fear of speaking up itself constrains learning. For example, Student M rarely met their supervisor and instead chose to work alone with only the support of family members rather than ask for help. He wrote that, at the end of their first meeting, "I was given the impression that this was the last meeting we would be having" and I "did not want to bombard him with emails" afterwards. Assuming that their supervisor's silence meant lack of interest or an expectation that the student would work alone, Student M did not arrange another meeting. Only later did he realise that this was not productive; in his essay, he wrote that he would, in future, "definitely push for more contact time in the initial phases."

The essays are often somewhat contradictory in how and where the students locate control. Student R relied on receiving data from an outside company to complete her project and this "could not be controlled by me, or even a member of staff... If I was placed in the same situation again, I would go directly to the company providing the data to query about it." Here, control and agency were initially located outside the student, but implicitly have been achieved by the student if she had become more pro-active earlier.

Student P was unusual in adopting the active voice much more frequently: "I decided to embark on... I designed my own project... I arranged meetings... I asked questions." He thus expressed a clear sense of control and agency, yet also contradicted himself by writing "I was required to research into..." Similarly, student Z mixed the passive and active voices: despite having made what was at the time an innovative suggestion of a placement with a departmental research team, he then sat back and waited for instructions: "I thought that everything will be planned for the students and all I will need to do is to show up in the office or the field and do the work that people would expect me to."

Often, students expressed proactivity in terms like 'independence' and 'initiative', meaning self-motivation even when nobody was prompting them. But sometimes, independence was exaggerated into a reluctance to ask questions or ask for help from other people at their placement. Student H felt that their project brief was vague but did not ask their supervisor to clarify it, later writing that "a highly important factor to progression in work is to not hesitate in asking questions." Similarly, Student L emphasised their own "independence" as a virtue, but seemed also to have avoided working more with others in the office and thus failed to gain from that opportunity when "I felt deserted and out of my depth" at the beginning. Student S wrote that "people generally assume that you will do your job, rather than checking and prompting.. [in future] I would work harder on my organisational skills and take a more proactive approach, through deeper self motivation, rather than prompts from others."

Overall, I was continually surprised at how the essays emphasised emotionality and linked the student's emotional state to their motivation or lack of motivation. Students frequently mentioned negative emotions of dread or fear of failure, nerves or worry, as well as their feelings of being foolish, under pressure or embarrassed. In terms of positive emotions, students frequently mentioned their increased confidence and pride in their work. The level of interest in the project was described in terms of a student's own excitement or enthusiasm for it, which often waxed and waned over a single semester, often declining into boredom, frustration and de-motivation after an initial period of high motivation and eagerness to get started. In terms of learning and reflecting on learning, therefore, these students chose to emphasise not merely their knowledge and skills, but their emotional state and self-awareness about how they deal with an unfamiliar and uncomfortable work environment, away from their academic 'comfort zone.'

Discussion and Conclusions

In these 26 reflective essays, students focussed less on lists of skills, as the literature on employability frequently does, and more on a 'whole-person' model of employability and their experiential learning prompted by moving into an unfamiliar context. Placements pushed students beyond their safe understandings of university skills, knowledge and social context, and forced them to become more pro-active. This led them to tackle unfamiliar activities and ideas, develop emotionally and engage more fully in their work experience.

These students' emotionally rich reflections suggest that they identified their experiential learning on placements to be more about coping with the challenge of non-academic ways of working, as well as recording and reflecting on the transformational aspects. Gaining skills, knowledge and contacts were mentioned, but were secondary. This supports the argument that employability support in HE should be more holistic, going beyond the set of skills that one can acquire or be taught. Rather, we should emphasise *becoming* employable as a process, enabling students to move from teacher-led university learning through lectures and similar formats, into more reflective, transformative learning outside the 'normal' academic context (Cranmer 2006, p.182).

In this small sample of 26 students, there was a diversity of experience that reflects the diversity of work (Rooney *et al.* 2006, p.135). Not only are there a range of possible jobs open to graduates, but a graduate may change jobs frequently during their working career. Many students, even shortly before graduating, do not know what kind of job they want and, therefore, what skills they need to succeed. Searching for a single 'model for employability' or 'a core template' for its delivery (Pegg *et al.* 2012, p.28-29) is therefore not only difficult but inappropriate: one size cannot fit all.

How might these findings enhance our educational practices around employability? First, developing a 'more-than-skills' approach in future also requires us to be aware that, although HEIs can support our students in work-based learning, they need to move out of their academic 'comfort zone' to truly begin learning about graduate-level jobs for themselves – this is not something that HEIs can provide within their existing structures.

Second, we should more explicitly prepare students by discussing their expectations of placements *before* they start, as reflective learning must begin before the experience itself. This is something that HEIs can provide within their existing structures, e.g. students could analyse their own learning styles and expectations, either in writing or in class discussion. Hills et al. (2003, page 223-225) therefore propose that the broader term of 'work-related learning' should encompass a 'continuum' from learning about work in the workplace, such as via placements, to learning outside the workplace, such as reflection or role play exercises in the HE environment, to deepen students' understanding.

Third, we should focus on how students meet the challenge of the unfamiliar and encourage them to develop resilience by realising that it is normal to be nervous and that speaking up is expected in the workplace. Moving beyond lists of skills, learning to become employable as a whole person in the modern workplace should instead emphasise a more developmental, emotionally-conscious approach. This may be something with which educators are not very comfortable, especially if they feel that many years working in academia make them ill-equipped to judge what is acceptable or not in today's non-academic workplaces.

But in my experience, academic careers provide many examples that educators can use in classes to support students on placements. For example, I explain how 'Awaydays' are used to get everyone in a department together and to discuss strategies for the future, and I then run a class exercise in the same way, with groupwork, rapporteuring and writing findings on whiteboards or flipcharts. I have also used my own experience of appraising and being appraised in my job to talk to students about the importance of reflection and about how I continually reflect on my own teaching in order to improve it, using learning styles questionnaires and mentoring research. In the end, perhaps this is the best lesson – that we all, in our learning and careers, must encounter the unfamiliar and learn from it and that is a process that never stops, for students or staff.

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