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The direction of reflection: helping students make sense of work placements

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Abstract

When students are asked to write an account reflecting on a work placement or internship, they have the opportunity to consider their period of work experience from a number of perspectives. For example, they could concentrate on the skills they developed or honed during the placement, which aspects of the role they found challenging, how they believe they benefited from the placement experience, the contribution they feel they made to the host organisation, the ways in which they applied learning from their studies to the workplace, and/or how the placement has influenced their thinking about their future career. However, the reality is that assessors are often left lamenting the quality of the reflective accounts produced by students. A common criticism is that students tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, focusing more on documenting the tasks they undertook while on placement, or simply listing skills without providing clear supporting evidence of how they were developed. It seems students often struggle with making links between their placements and other aspects of their studies and personal development. With a view to providing students with guidance and support to enhance their reflective practice and writing skills, a structured approach to compiling a reflective account of a placement or internship experience is underway. This approach concentrates on direction of thinking and on providing guidance on making links between work, study, career plans and so on. An overview of this structured approach is presented in the paper. It is anticipated that it will make an important contribution to helping students make greater sense of their work placement experiences in the wider context of their own development and preparation for graduate employment. The research presented in this paper forms part of a wider study on developing student skills in reflection.

Keywords: placement; employability; graduate; reflection; reflective writing; reflective practice; graduate recruitment; work-related learning

The whole point about employability in education is how to develop it as much as possible, in advance of the events associated with major employment, and to see it in terms of a lifelong capability. Such thinking transcends short-term 'fill ups' of skills. While reflection underpins personal qualities within employment and the preparation for seeking employment, the ability to stand back and assess one's position in particular circumstances (work, age, education achieved and needed, ambition and other lifespan issues), is a third role for reflection which we will sum up as contributing to 'lifelong learning'. (Moon 2004:3)

Introduction

The 2012 Wilson Report entitled “A review of business-university collaboration” drew attention to the number of studies that provide evidence of the value of work placements for preparing students for graduate-level employment and enhancing their employability skills (Wilson 2012:37). The report goes on to stress the challenge facing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and businesses in co-ordinating and providing appropriate placement for students.

A key challenge facing those Higher Education Institutions which do offer student placements is the task of equipping students effectively with the mindset, knowledge and skills they require to undertake a placement. This challenge includes preparing them for their placement; supporting their transition into a placement; helping students integrate into, and perform successfully within, their placement workplace; maintaining links with their university and programme of study; and then aiding their transition back to their studies and their progression to graduation and graduate employment.

A further challenge facing HEIs is that of helping students to make sense of their placements; enabling them to maximise the value of such experience during their degree course; and ensuring that the placement experience is integrated appropriately into their programme of studies. This challenge involves helping students to understand what they have gained from their placement, as well as how they can present what they have learned and the skills they have acquired to best effect to potential employers in their CVs, job applications, recruitment interviews, and so on. As Moon has noted, a number of studies undertaken in the 1990s suggested that this sense-making and evidencing of experience can be a problematic area for students. She observed, for example, that according to the findings of those studies “while many students had the skills and attributes that employers want, they did not seem to have either the self-awareness or the language in which to express or describe them at recruitment interviews” (Moon 2004:3). In other words, students “were not able to reflect on what they had gained from higher education” (2004:3).

Given the struggles that some students face with reflection, and the fact that some may not have developed advanced reflective capacity, Moon advocates the gradual introduction of reflective tasks rather than “expecting learners to work on the clean white page of a new learning journal without practice” (Moon 1999:173). Taking this as our point of departure, we have been exploring ways of guiding and supporting students in the development of their reflective capacity, their habits of reflection, and their fluency in the production of written reflective accounts. This work has been undertaken in the context of a number of enterprise and work-related learning projects, including

projects associated with year-long placements, shorter placements or internships, and business start-up and enterprise creation projects.

In the paper, we focus on our work on a project involving short placements (typically of 10-12 weeks), and introduce a structured approach which we have devised to help students through the process of preparing to construct a reflective account of their work placement. The underlying aim of the approach is to help develop students' skills in reflective practice and reflective writing skills and to foster the habit of reflection.

Before presenting our approach, we discuss some of the relevant literature on student placements, and on the challenges of helping students to reflect on those placements.

In defining 'roles' for reflection in employability, it is important to recognise the more general role of reflection as an essential basis for good quality (meaningful) learning. Encouragement of that role in all learning is central to the activities of higher education, and while it transcends other aspects of employability, it is an assumed quality of graduates. (Moon 2004:3)

Background

There is a burgeoning array of books and "how to" guides for students regarding preparation for graduate employment, career planning, employability and personal development. Many of these emphasise the value of undertaking some form of work placement or internship during a degree programme. For example, in "*Brilliant Intern*", students are advised that:

An internship is a big deal. It's not quite your first job, but it could lead to one. It won't tie you to one industry for the rest of your life, but could go a long way to plotting your career path. It won't cement your professional reputation but could cultivate it. In short, a good internship has the potential to be a defining moment in your passage from student to worker. (Scherer 2012: xi).

Scherer goes on to highlight the value of a placement for confirming "to a potential employer that you possess the fundamental skills required for work", as well as for giving you "a chance to show that you can transfer those oft-mentioned transferable skills from education to the workplace" (2012:xi). Further benefits of placements emphasised by Scherer include the opportunity to "get a real insight into a particular industry before committing to a job in it", giving exposure to the "day-to-day routine involved in a job" (2012:xi). He also refers to the value a placement can bring for developing a "raft of new and relevant contacts, both within your host organisation and outside of it" (2012:xi-xii).

For a placement experience to be of true value, however, students need to understand the difference between experience and learning. As Cottrell notes:

Experience can be the basis for learning and development. However, just because we have been through an experience it does not mean we have learnt all there is to learn about it – or even that we have learnt anything at all. (Cottrell 2010:190).

Cottrell goes on to note that reflection is about making sense of experience which supports the learning process: “it [reflection] is where we analyse experience, actively attempting to ‘make sense’ or find meaning in it (2010:190). Arguably, only once this sense making process has been undertaken will students be in a position to communicate their learning and the value of their placement experience to potential employers during recruitment activities. In this regard, Rae advocates that:

Students should be given support and encouragement to use a personal development process enabling them to set personal goals for individualised learning, to self-assess and reflect on their learning and skills, thence gaining ownership and retain evidence of their learning and attainment, and applying this to produce useful documents such as career plans, curriculum vitae and job applications. (Rae 207:613).

In Higher Education, such self-evaluative and reflective practice is indeed often employed to tackle this issue of making sense of experience in the context of student placements. A common requirement, for example, is for students to produce some form of written reflective account or report about their placement experience. Bassot highlights the benefit of reflective writing as helping us “link ideas together and discover meaning from the things we see and experience” (Bassot 2013:14). The reflective assignments and activities undertaken in the context of student placements are typically intended to facilitate this process of connecting ideas and thoughts and to draw out meaning from what has been experienced in the workplace. Such assignments are sometimes referred to as “structured reflection” (Hind and Moss 2011:328).

The requirement for students to produce reflective accounts can present a challenge for educators, largely because “not everyone finds reflection an easy manner of working” (Moon 1999:173). Furthermore “myths about reflective practice” exist, and these can “get in the way of its development” leading to some people having a “very superficial or misleading understanding of what is involved”, which in turn can result in a “situation in which reflective practice is blocked – prevented from developing by a failure to appreciate what it is really about” (Thompson and Thompson 2008:148). A superficial understanding of what reflection involves can lead to the belief that it is “simply a matter of pausing for thought from time to time” (2008:148). In this way, the importance is missed of “connecting reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action or of making links between both of them and the underlying professional knowledge base” (2008:148). When it comes to producing a written reflective account, a superficial grasp of what reflection entails is also likely to lead to a lack of appreciation of “the difference between a descriptive account and a reflective or analytical one”. The

consequence of this is that the person who has produced the written account fails to “get the benefit of having a genuinely reflective account to review and learn from” (2008:148).

Our observations have been that key weaknesses in student reflective accounts about their placement experiences tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, rather limited in scope (perhaps just focusing on one two points or aspects of work), vague with regard to learning and skills development, and lacking in clear connections between studies and work. Other authors have noted similar issues and concerns (see for example Ryan 2013).

Elsewhere, we have reported on our work in the context of student enterprise, to foster skills in the habit of reflection (see Fulford and Bailey 2014; 2015). Here, we focus on the development of an approach to help students survey their placement experience and probe it to draw out learning and meaning from their experience. The intention is to build on our prior work on the *habit* of reflection to look now at scope for *breadth* of reflection. A future plan is to move on to consider how we can bring these aspects together to help students increase the *depth* of their reflection.

The direction of reflection

Taking as our point of departure, Moon’s point about the difficulty of expecting learners to “work on the clean white page of a new learning journal without practice” (Moon 1999:173), and bearing in mind also our own observations regarding the limitations of students’ written reflective accounts, we sought to develop a structured overview of the key elements of a typical student work placement which students can use to help trigger reflection on their placement experience. Drawing inspiration from recent trends in visualisation, particularly visual portrayals of business models and (see for example Osterwalder and Pigneur 2010), we depicted this structured overview of a placement in graphical or diagrammatic form. We denoted it the “Placement Panorama”.

This panorama is presented in Figure 1 below, and then each of its key aspects is explained.

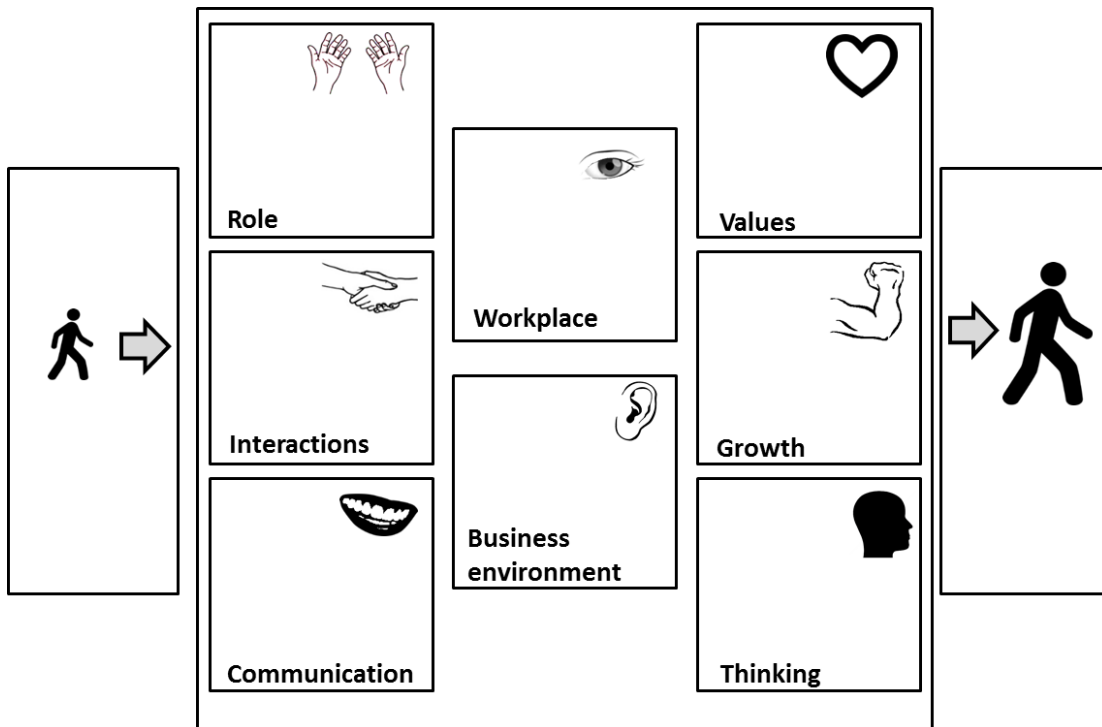


Figure 1: The Placement Panorama

The Placement Panorama depicted above is divided into three key aspects. Working from left to right, these aspects are: transition into placement; the placement itself; and then transition from the placement back to studies. Table 1 below provides an explanation of each of these.

Table 1: The Placement Panorama Explained

Aspect	Explanation
Transition into placement	Opportunity for the student to consider the nature of the organisation they are joining; the role to which they have been appointed; and the knowledge, skills and experience they bring to that role.
The placement	Opportunity for the student to consider their workplace activity on placement (role; interactions with colleagues; and communication); their workplace surroundings (the organisation and its context); and personal development (values, growth, and development of thinking).
Transition from placement	Opportunity for the student to consider how they have changed or grown as a result of the placement, including the new skills they have acquired; new situations they have encountered; and the new understanding they have of themselves and their career plans and prospects.

Table 2 below provides some examples of the reflection triggers associated with each aspect of the Placement Panorama.

Table 2: Sample Reflection Triggers

Aspect	Sample reflection triggers
Transition into placement	<p>What type of organisation am I joining? What do I bring to the role? Which aspects of my studies to date could I apply in this placement? Which other aspects of my background and experience might help me in this placement? What are my expectations of this placement?</p>
The placement	<p>Workplace activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role: what does my role involve? Which aspects do I enjoy/not enjoy? How am I applying my academic knowledge to my role? • Interactions: structure of organisation? Teamwork opportunities? Understanding of team roles? Leadership experience? Development of my professional network? Conflict management? • Communication: opportunity to develop presentation skills? Report writing skills? Development of social media skills? <p>Workplace surroundings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace: Nature of workplace (e.g. formal/informal)? Integration/'fit' within workplace? Opportunity to explore other roles within workplace? • Business environment: Understanding of wider business environment? Nature of marketplace? Understanding of clients, competitors, suppliers, etc.? Development of wider business network? <p>My development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values: Fit between my values and values of organisation? Any conflict of values or challenge to my values? Growth in understanding of my values? • Growth: Growth in confidence? Resilience? • Thinking: Development of new views on specific matters? Application of academic thinking to work-based issues?
Transition from placement	<p>What skills did I acquire during the placement? What skills did I enhance during the placement? How have I changed as a result of the placement? What have I learned about myself during the placement? What went well (and why)? What did not go well (and why)? How has my thinking about future career changed?</p>

Concluding remarks and next steps

In this paper, a new approach (The Placement Panorama) has been introduced to help students develop their skills and fluency in reflection in the context of a placement experience. The emphasis of the Placement Panorama is on demonstrating to students the scope they have for reflecting on a placement experience by helping them visualise their reflective space, including transition into placement, the placement itself and then transitioning from placement. It is envisaged that this Panorama will help students produce more rounded and comprehensive written accounts of their placement experience by prompting, or directing, them to reflect on a wide range of aspects of that experience.

We are starting to use the Placement Panorama outlined in this paper to guide and direct students as they prepare to compile reflective accounts of their placement experiences. The intention is to highlight to students the importance of taking a broad view when they reflect, scanning the placement experience in its entirety in order to draw out relevant learning from each aspect.

The Placement Panorama can be introduced prior to placement; then used as a tool during placement to gather experience and reflections “on the go”, and then used finally used as a post-placement tool to bring together the placement experience and begin to contextualise it in relation to the student’s studies and their future career aspirations. The Panorama can be used by an individual student as they compile their own personal reflections, but can equally well be applied in peer-to-peer discussions, tutor-student meetings, or during placement review visits.

The next phase of our work will involve the compilation of a more comprehensive catalogue of reflection triggers for each aspect of the Placement Panorama. The Panorama will then be evaluated among a range of student groups across different placement types.

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