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Experiential Learning as Learning to Effect

Norman Evans

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Experiential Learning as Learning to Effect

Norman Evans

Introduction

Learning to effect can have many meanings. Here, it is taken to refer to ways in which the student's learning can be not merely effected but facilitated in ways calculated to enhance the quality of the student's experience of learning and the learning acquired. A central issue for higher education, that involves seeking a fit between student as learner, whatever his or her personal or occupational intentions, and how an institution organizes itself and offers its curriculum, whatever purposes the institution espouses. The theme in this chapter is that for some and probably an increasing number of students experiential learning, its assessment and accreditation can be a powerful contribution to securing that fit and hence improving the quality of the student's learning.

The connecting bridge between experiential learning and the quality of a student's learning is motivation. Experiential learning is that learning which has been acquired from experience. There is an obvious truth that formal teaching in lecture, tutorial, laboratory or project assignments promoted and provided by academic staff offers ample opportunities for students to learn from experience. Indeed, much discussion of pedagogy and methodology seeks to exploit those opportunities for students to enhance their learning. And much of that discussion concerns the motivation of students for learning and ways of strengthening it. But that is not the experiential learning which is the theme of this chapter.

Prior and current experiential learning

The attention here is concentrated on two categories of experiential learning. Each is different in origin but both share similar characteristics. Both reach deeply into students' motivation. (As will be mentioned later, both touch motivational issues affecting academic staff and even institutions.) Both are concerned with off-campus learning. One is prior experiential learning. The

other is current experiential learning derived from experience provided by an institution as part of its provision of a course. The common component of both prior and current experiential learning is systematic reflection on experience. The difference is that prior experiential learning refers to learning acquired without any necessary connection with formal educational institutions, whereas current experiential learning is under the direct responsibility of an institution. A student on a sandwich course in which the learning derived from experience is not assessed should be acquiring current experiential learning. A mechanical engineer or unqualified social worker or office manager coming into higher education could have acquired prior experiential learning from their prior work experience. Both the latter are forms of uncertificated experiential learning, and need to be differentiated from prior learning which has previously been certificated. So, for example, someone with a Higher National Diploma in Mechanical Engineering or a nurse on the General Register for Nursing or a social worker with a Certificate of Qualification in Social Work may have that certificated learning taken into account for credit towards a degree in a relevant discipline as prior learning.

The central issue, therefore, that arises from experiential learning concerns finding reliable ways of converting uncertificated learning into certificated learning. For prior experiential learning, such conversion requires an individual to reflect systematically on some experience, and to express clearly what is claimed to have been learned from it in ways that can be considered for assessment and perhaps accreditation by academic staff. Those claims to knowledge and skill derived from experience must be supported by evidence relating directly to the claim being made and again must be acceptable to academic assessors. All of this is the direct responsibility of the person making the claim. Everything to do with judgements about the validity of the claim is the sole responsibility of the academics.

For the individuals concerned, this means isolating an experience which seems to have resulted in learning something new. It means formulating what that new learning was and then producing the necessary evidence to prove that the new learning was acquired. For the academics, it means using whatever assessment procedure seems appropriate. It could be that the previous examination paper is set as a challenge examination. It could be that the claim being considered could be considered against the content of a particular course unit or module. Obviously that is relatively straightforward where units or modules are written with learning outcomes or intentions alongside the syllabus description. Where a portfolio has been compiled by an individual, documenting both the learning claim and its supporting evidence, an academic assessor may require additional evidence. This may be necessary because, characteristically, experiential learning claims may demonstrate an imbalance between practice which is rich and theoretical understanding which may appear weak. Some required readings and an essay assignment can either produce evidence which can substantiate the validity of the claim or confirm that the claim is invalid. An interview may

resolve such issues, either in person or by telephone. Whatever the approach, an academic must find ways of making a judgement which satisfies all the necessary criteria. This is essential to preserve the academic integrity not only of the assessment of experiential learning but of the institution itself.

For current experiential learning, the same principles hold good. The essential difference is that the work experience being offered to the students as part of a course is under the direct responsibility of the institution so that the learning intentions may well have been set in advance or determined during the early part of the work experience. In many cases, this is done through negotiations between the student, workplace supervisor and academic staff. The same sequence of reflection on experience to produce statements of learning supported by evidence has to be completed.

For prior learners, the motivation developed as a result of going through that sequence can be powerful. People can reveal to themselves that they have acquired considerable knowledge and understanding without realizing it. And this has a powerful motivational effect because it is self-revealed as a personal accomplishment. Confidence can be boosted so that embarking on a systematic programme of learning becomes not just a possibility previously unconsidered but an engaging and even enticing prospect.

Current experiential learning can also fire students with a new and sometimes different interest in learning more. Making the connection between theory and practice is one thing. But realizing that learning from and at work is not only possible but something to experience and that it can become countable towards the award of a degree is a motivating factor, difficult to reproduce in any other context. The proviso, of course, is that current experiential learning has to be assessed for academic purposes and integrated with the student's other academic assessments. Following such a period of work experience leading to assessment of learning, students are often better at learning during the remaining part of their formal course in the institution.¹ In both prior and current experiential learning, therefore, there is an obvious connection between experiential learning, its assessment and accreditation and the quality of the student's *subsequent* quality of learning.

Applications of prior experiential learning

Before exploring how the uses both of prior and current experiential learning can be used to enhance the quality of student learning in the context of higher education, it is important to notice the applications of prior experiential learning (PEL) are almost limitless. Access courses for higher education often include a PEL element. In further education, too, the assessment of experiential learning (APEL) is becoming ever more important. The Business and Technician Education Council, the City & Guilds and the Royal Society of Arts have all issued guideline documents to help institutions devise PEL schemes for their own courses and qualifications. The National Council for Vocational Qualifications has the APEL (it refers to it as APL

achievements) as a central part of its policies for assessing competencies for National Vocational Qualifications. The Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work (CCETSW) has APEL enshrined in its regulations for the recently established Diploma in Social Work. Both CCETSW and the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting both incorporate APEL for post-qualifying qualifications. The newly-established Training and Enterprise Councils are being encouraged by the Department of Employment and Training and Education Enterprise Directorate to deploy APEL activities. Employers increasingly are paying attention to the potential significance of employees' on-the-job learning (experiential learning in the workplace) in their search for ways of increasing the efficiency of their workforces. Employment Training Schemes and Youth Training Schemes have experiential learning components. The Management Charter Initiative has APEL as a requirement for its Certificates in Management, a requirement which will extend to its Diploma and Masters' level qualifications when they are fully developed. UK Government ministers make reference to experiential learning in some of their pronouncements. So there can be little doubt that APEL has rapidly assumed an important role nationally.

Experiential learning in higher education

Chronologically, higher education in the UK began developing in this field at the start of the 1980s. The case was there were many people who were unable to gain access to higher education because they did not have the formal entry qualifications, though they were eminently qualified to begin studying at degree level. That case was based on the assertion that many men and women learn from their experience of life, work and leisure and accumulate knowledge and skill which under scrutiny compares favourably with the levels of learning implied by formal educational qualifications. The case was based on the further assertion that, in certain cases, some of the knowledge and skill identified could merit recognition as equivalent to parts of a degree programme. In those cases, APEL might lead to admission with advanced standing. If that claim could be substantiated the implications for recruitment to higher education were obvious.

APEL is now soundly established in the UK, at least in polytechnics and colleges of higher education. Between 1985 and 1987, ten institutions were involved in the first development project funded by the CNAA which began to work out reliable procedures and assessment schemes for using experiential learning both for admission to degree courses and for admission with advanced standing.² That followed a preliminary inquiry also funded by CNAA, reviewing all entry regulations to check whether there were any good reasons for not introducing the assessment of prior experiential learning into higher education as an additional means of dealing with admissions.³ After the establishment of CNAA's credit and accumulation and transfer scheme

(CATS) in March 1986, many institutions in the polytechnics and colleges sector took a sharp interest in APEL. This was because from the beginning of discussions about CATS at CNAA, APEL was included, and when these regulations were published, APEL was given national recognition since academic credit for APEL at both first degree and Master's level was authorized. From 1986, a steadily increasing number of polytechnics and colleges have developed their own CATS schemes, and every time APEL opportunities have been included.⁴

Universities are only just beginning to get involved with APEL in any formal sense. Sheffield, Nottingham, Warwick, Goldsmiths' College in the University of London and Kent are all collaborating in a TEED funded project under the title of the Potential of APEL in Universities, working along broadly the same lines as the CNAA project of 1986-87. And Liverpool University together with Liverpool Polytechnic and Chester College are working on a project for current experiential learning under the title of Work-based Learning For Academic Credit. The hope is that these projects will be the forerunners of developments in universities, as the early CNAA projects encouraged developments in polytechnics and colleges.

Experiential learning and admissions

The developments just described indicate that a new set of academic criteria is being used by a significant number of higher education institutions when considering candidates for entry to degree courses and for higher education awards. Such a development has considerable significance for moves towards a mass higher education system. Despite the uncertainties of demography, current moves in the UK towards a mass higher education are likely to lead to a relatively increased influx of two categories of entrants: older men and women who do not possess the formal educational qualifications for entry to higher education (some of whom will merit admission with advanced standing), and younger students who come through the vocational education route or who because of their learning styles can learn most effectively through a mixture of formal teaching and learning by doing. For the second group especially, the pursuit of academic subjects in a diet built on the traditional curriculum of formal lectures, laboratories and set assignments may not be appropriate. Experiential learning has much to offer some of them as a prime source of enhancing their learning achievements, since:

Experiential Learning refers to learning in which the Learner is directly in contact with the realities being studied... direct contact with the phenomenon being studied rather than merely thinking about it.

(Morris Keeton, 1978)⁵

This is why experiential learning can speak directly to the motivation for learning of many students.

Experiential learning as a link between higher education and employment

There is another reason why experiential learning is important in the context of the overall expansion of higher education. Formal education no longer has a monopoly of study leading to first degree and postgraduate awards. Many companies offer studies at those levels for their own employees. The Learning from Experience Trust has promoted the credit-rating of the in-house provision of more than 30 companies for academic credit towards Bachelor's and Master's degrees. In addition, a score or more of companies have arranged with CNAA or their local polytechnic to have their in-house education, training and provision credit-rated for academic value and then validated by academic authorities. In every case, the companies' in-house education and training schemes are scrutinized by academics, credit-rating values being recommended at either the first, second or third year level of an undergraduates' course or at Master's level and those credit-ratings are then validated by an institution with the authority to do so. Any company employee who has then completed a company course which has been validated may claim the amount of credit assigned towards the qualification being sought from any institution willing to accept that credit and with the academic organization which enables the individuals to complete the study programme for which the qualification will be awarded. Thus uncertificated learning becomes certificated learning.

Almost inevitably the question arises during negotiations in completing these arrangements: are there possibilities for employees' on-the-job learning to be accredited as well?

All these developments in APEL are part of an educational response to changing social, economic and domestic circumstances of increasing numbers of population. Most people in employment cannot afford to switch to becoming full-time students. Full-time study is increasingly expensive to undertake. Employers are more and more concerned to improve the effectiveness of their employees while being increasingly anxious about the costs involved in both releasing employees for part-time study and the additional costs involved through those people not being at the workplace. So both employees and employer have a direct interest in enabling the companies' own investment in education and training to be recognized academically, so that time, money and effort are exploited to a double purpose.

However, some of the implications of these developments for the quality of student learning need further comment. It is frequently the case that the type of negotiations conducted between a company and an academic institution leads to important curricular improvements for each. Companies will say that they are stimulated to improve their own programme as a result of discussion about the credit-rating and validation of their provision particularly over questions arising from assessment. More important though for higher education is that academics report the same. So the courses offered to

regular students can be improved as academics learn from employers at first hand how their students can learn more through altering the content of courses, changing the emphasis of material and even the methodology. All of these possibilities in enhancing the quality of the student's learning stem from APEL.

In many cases, these developments under the APEL banner lead to arrangements between academic institutions and employers for a scheme of negotiated learning agreements or contracts for employees. Typically, a learning agreement is a result of a three-way negotiation between employee, employer and academic. The agreement will set down what learning is to be attempted, how it is to be achieved, what evidence will be used for assessment purposes and how it will be assessed. Such an agreement is likely to include APEL and credit derived from in-house courses. The vital point about these learning agreements, however, is that in this way employers can be assured that additional learning agreed will be of direct benefit to the company. If an employee as student learner knows that then the motivational factors are obvious.

Learning agreements of this kind are spreading into the mainstream work of some institutions for undergraduates. In Napier Polytechnic, a pilot project on 'Work-based Learning for Students on Sandwich Courses' began by involving courses in Hotel, Catering and Management and Business Studies with Commerce and Civil Engineering being added in the second year. Now, the project is spreading across the institution as its value for students, academic staff and employers is realized and is being documented. That project has included the coaching of students, academics and employers alike in the way learning agreements can be negotiated, and the setting out of what is to be learned during the period of work placement and how it is to be assessed academically, so that those assessments can be incorporated in final degree classifications. With Liverpool University's Science students, Liverpool Polytechnic and Chester College are working on a project entitled 'Work-based Learning for Academic Credit for Non-sandwich Course Students'. The students involved are volunteers and are spending one term of their three-year degree programme to undertake a period in work placements with four days per week off-campus and one day a week in the institution for tutorials, seminars and a half-day course on 'Employment in the 1990s'. There is no necessary vocational connection between their degree programme and work placement, the students receiving the same amount of academic credit they would have done had they spent that period on campus.

For both of these developments, it is the negotiated learning agreement which anchors the use of current experiential learning to clearly-defined academic standards. These are examples of developments which can be found in polytechnics and colleges and where institutions are collaborating with employers. All reports suggest that these arrangements are making a marked difference to students' experience of learning and their motivation for further learning.

Experiential learning and applicants to higher education

Learning to effect has to begin with applicants. There are two unresolved questions about applicants. How can we attract into the higher education those who have the undoubted ability to succeed but who either do not think of it or if they do think of it reject the thought because their experience at school has suggested to them that they are poor as learners on conventional programmes in conventional institutions? How can we best serve these students with not only an appropriate content of learning but with appropriate learning styles?

Experiential learning can contribute to solving the first conundrum about attracting non-traditional groups. The implicit message of experiential learning is different from the message most higher education institutions send to potential applicants. Instead of institutions saying implicitly, 'We accept you, provided you can show that you can cope with what we are offering', the experiential learning message is 'We value what you have accomplished so far. Come and let us see what those accomplishments amount to and let us together plan how you are going to use them to your best advantage. It is possible that we shall discover that what you have learned already can give you academic credit towards the degree you may want.'

Experiential learning can contribute to solving the second question by deliberately providing as options experiential learning through work-based learning programmes as a complement to formal tuition. As indicated already, the conceptual and technical issues have been settled in relation to work experience through negotiated learning agreements, planned to ensure that intended learning outcomes are clearly stated alongside the academic activities to be undertaken. Evidence of the attainment of those outcomes can be used for the assessment of the learning acquired. These arrangements meet two vital requirements for effective learning. First, they encourage students to accept responsibility for their own learning. They are additional educational modes. They can meet the preferred ways of learning for many students. In turn, they can have a positive effect on the way in which students tackle formal courses within the institution after a period of work-based learning. Students can become more motivated, moving from passive to active learning which teachers claim to seek to achieve in their students.

Negotiated learning agreements or contracts (as they are sometimes called) involving experiential learning meet a further important educational requirement: namely, academic staff are able to fulfil their obligations for ensuring that their students learn. Also, such contracts with students can help staff to discharge their professional responsibilities for monitoring student performance and making academic judgements about that performance, thus preserving the integrity of students' academic study. In other words, current experiential learning offered by an institution to its students under these carefully controlled arrangements can become normal mainstream academic

work. It can extend the curriculum opportunities available by providing enhanced opportunities for students to learn when this mode of learning fits their preferred learning style.

Experiential learning and some institutional issues

If that is a sketch about the ways APEL can connect with an institution's life, then the picture needs more detail to substantiate the claim that experiential learning can enhance students' learning. At the admissions stage, guidance and advice about selecting learning programmes and how to make the best of the opportunities on offer become more important as the student entry becomes more heterogeneous and as the possibilities for students become more varied. This often confusing widening of educational opportunities is compounded where institutions are organizing their academic provision into modules and discrete units. The assessment of prior experiential learning offers an occasion for the advice and help many students need. Because the process of systematic reflection on experience is the essential basis for assessment of prior experiential learning, individuals frequently reveal to themselves all sorts of accomplishments which they either took for granted or undervalued or even did not know they had achieved. This often results in a changed self-image. Often, their view of their futures can change with an obvious influence on what they want to study.

Institutions and individual students confirm that something else can happen to individuals who have had their prior experiential learning assessed. Their confidence is boosted. Since they have revealed to themselves what they have learned successfully even though they may not have realized it, they can be more positive in their approach to formal learning in a higher education institution. Tutors are very familiar with the way many older students doubt their capacity to cope with degree-level work and worry as they look for assurance that they are coming up to scratch. APEL can often enable students to quieten that anxiety and get on with their studying with the enjoyment which comes from self-confidence.

Correspondingly experiential learning can widen the scope for admission tutors. Many have always taken seriously the attributes of men and women applicants who do not fit the conventional academic requirements for admission. But doing so systematically is a different matter. That is particularly important when it comes to admission with advanced standing, rather than to the beginning of a degree programme. Any admission with advanced standing must stand the most rigorous academic scrutiny. APEL provides that facility because of the way learning claims and evidence lead to assessment. So APEL can speak directly to those many potential students who do not approach conventional higher education but can and do with APEL acting as a magnet.

Experiential learning and its assessment can also serve as a catalyst for institutional development. The variety of personal circumstances of many of these kinds of applicants can affect the administrative, structural and regulatory framework of an institution. Many would-be students need to be able to study on a part-time basis, even on an occasional basis with facilities for mixed modes moving at will between part-time, full-time and occasional study. This can only be done when the academic work of the institutions is arranged on a unit or modular basis. Creating those arrangements is a major administrative and academic task involving re-writing of regulations not only for admission but for courses and programmes and their assessment. Administrators looking for ways of increasing student numbers may see APEL as a means of doing so, but such a development, if taken seriously, can prompt a wide range of institutional developments.

Obviously APEL is not, and should not be, expected to be of commanding interest to all universities, polytechnics and colleges. An inner-city location, a student profile in which mature students are prominent, a declared mission to attract non-traditional entrants, and a preparedness to develop programmes for professional people in collaboration with employing organizations will incline some institutions towards serving the students for whom APEL is especially appropriate. Those institutions who are so inclined can find that the stimulus of using APEL procedures releases powerful catalytic influences going beyond the regulations implications mentioned already. It becomes a matter of the institution's wider mission and how the institution is perceived by the general public.

Experiential learning and the curriculum

With experiential learning, the curriculum becomes critically important and in four ways. A message to possible students saying bring what you have and we will see where it can take you implies, firstly, an acceptance that while an institution can contribute to a student's learning, the institution will recognize that students have acquired learning which meets the standards of higher education without having been designed with entrance to higher education in mind. The institution has to accept that it has no monopoly over what counts as a valid 'higher' education experience. Secondly, and even more important, what students want to learn in the future may well be different from what is already on offer through existing courses so additional courses may be required. Thirdly, it implies providing different ways of learning, different learning styles to suit the best ways of learning for individual students. Fourthly, it begins to raise questions about the delivery systems used, whether formal tuition, distance learning, or the establishment of learning centres where video tapes, slides, and interactive PC programmes are available.

One of the clearest curricular implications of developing APEL schemes is the desirability for syllabus descriptions to be complemented by statements of intended learning outcomes. And this applies to any and every subject.

Where this combination of content description and learning outcomes is available, it acts as an assessment instrument for students and tutors alike. For the students, learning outcomes can be an invaluable diagnostic form of self-assessment. If intended learning outcomes are set down in documentary form and lodged in the library, any intending or enrolled students can look up a particular course where they may think that their experiential learning might produce academic credit and begin to test the validity of their possible claim for themselves. For academic staff, it means they have ready to hand an assessment tool when needing to make judgements about APEL claims for academic credit in relation to specific courses.

The development of learning outcomes is an important element of curricular development in its own right. It clarifies the purposes of any particular programme of learning. As it does so, it tests course content against the intended outcomes. And it can de-mystify the business of learning for both students and staff.

A curriculum organized to facilitate effective learning through making available the intended learning outcomes for particular courses or units rather than syllabus descriptions depends increasingly for its effectiveness on quality of guidance available to students. This need is increasingly recognized in institutions. The more varied the student body becomes and is confronted with an increasingly complicated array of opportunities offered through unit or modular course arrangements, the more the kind of help tutors give typically to full-time traditional 18+ students following linear courses is insufficient. APEL points this up. Determining students' most suitable programmes means having available generalist advisors who can listen attentively, and help students clarify what is best for them and with full knowledge of the institution itself and its courses. APEL can be a point of development for services of this quality.

Fourthly, experiential learning (both prior and current) can influence the curriculum through the possibilities it opens for student generated curricula which in turn can have a powerful thrust for effective learning. Apart from the School of Independent Studies Degree in the Polytechnic of East London and variants on independent study facilitated through learning agreements, there is no systematic approach in the UK to enable groups of students to negotiate courses of study with academic staff as part of an institution's regular activity. Since APEL presupposes that students bring significant learning achievements with them, and since the self-assessment facet of APEL can give students a more reliable sense of their future learning requirements, and since those requirements may not be readily available in the existing course programme, the motivation for learning can obviously be increased if they can learn what really interests them. The particular tough intellectual task of formulating a new course in outline, negotiating it, and learning how to make it substantial through discussions with academic staff, is an educational enterprise in its own right. So a student-negotiated course based on APEL amounts to a double enhancement of learning for the student: planning and negotiating it and then undergoing it.

Using experience as a component of the curriculum for student learning can extend the curriculum not merely in relation to the content of learning programmes but also to its pedagogy – the activities through which students can learn – and how the results of that learning are to be assessed. In each of those senses, APEL widens the curriculum. Learning derived from experience is in most respects different from learning according to prescribed syllabuses.

Experiential learning and some academic issues

Even if these claims about APEL acting as a stimulus for educational development are convincing, no claim has been made that its introduction is straightforward. Maintaining academic rigour must be central, a point which begins with academic staff. Staff whose own experience as students and as teachers in a higher-education environment predominantly of the traditional pattern of full-time study, perhaps in a residential community and often in specialist discipline studies, can sometimes find it hard to accept that students can learn effectively at undergraduate or graduate level without any reference to themselves or their colleagues. For some staff this can be seen as a threat to their professional role, even raising awkward questions about their personal significance as academics.

Even assuming that the validity of off-campus learning is accepted intellectually, the practice of APEL raises unfamiliar questions of assessment. If a teacher has not taught a student then clearly the evidence that student can present (to support a claim for assessment) is bound to be different from the evidence which the teacher relies on for those taught in formal classes. There is an additional complication. Adults learn eclectically, not according to the boundaries of knowledge organized in discrete disciplines. This poses a question as to whether experiential learning is considered for its course relatedness – does the evidence of experiential learning presented fit a particular course unit or module? Or can it be considered on its own merits in terms of evidence of a conceptual grasp which broadly matches the levels of understanding required for the same level of study under consideration? The description of learning programmes through learning outcomes to accompany syllabus descriptions clearly facilitates assessment of the former. But for the latter, academic, professional judgement must remain the sole authority.

It raises the fundamental question as to whether experience as the source of experiential learning can enable individuals to acquire propositional learning.⁶ Some believe that propositional knowledge can result from systematic reflection on experience; others are more sceptical. The point is that it is not an either/or matter. Anyone who attempts to reflect on experience so as to state what has been learned almost inevitably finds themselves learning more about that past experience. The systematic reflection on experience is not an activity which can be static, applying only to the past. Beginning there, it fuses with the present so that additional learning is acquired, additional that

is to what was learnt before. There is no reason why propositional knowledge should not emerge from these mental exercises and be documented as such. The first brochure of the Learning from Experience Trust included the following: 'Most people know more than they think they know, if only they knew that they know it.' Therein lies some of the value of experiential learning when brought into academic settings. Through reflection, tacit understanding can become conscious and, thereby, more amenable to deployment.

Assessments of experiential learning become specially important when they are considered for advanced standing in either graduate or postgraduate programmes. The tutor's professional academic judgement has to withstand especially rigorous scrutiny by academic peers where the stakes are higher than for admission to undergraduate study. Entry admissions are primarily decisions about ability to cope with the course. Admission with advanced standing involves judgements about an individual having, in effect, completed parts of the course before enrolling on it. This is where the institutional stance is so important. Unless the senate or academic board underwrites APEL with formal authority, through approved official documents incorporated in the institution's regulations, the use of experiential learning will lack academic and social legitimacy. An institution's responsibility towards the public is to ensure that its academic work is of the highest order. Only on that basis can the development of APEL in higher education be securely grounded.

All this requires a systematic provision of continuing professional development for academic, administrative and support staff to ensure that these sorts of flexible provisions produce a valid day-to-day experience for the students concerned.

Experiential learning as learning to effect

Significant learning has occurred when thinking involves alterations, additions and renovations to the furniture of the mind as contrasted with short-term memorization and reproduction. The case for APEL is that as a mode of learning, it can be a thoroughly creditable contribution to effective learning quite apart from the service it can offer to institutional development.

Systematic reflection on experience requires careful thought and determined work. When a topic being studied by individuals is their personal experience and the result of that study is an account of what was learned from that experience, then there is little doubt that the intellectual demands made to complete those reflective tasks satisfactorily make for an effective mode of learning. People can learn new things as they reflect on their experience. They can gain new insights. They can make fresh connections. They can recognize gaps in their knowledge which need to be filled. They may need a good deal of tutorial help along the way. But it is a thoroughly responsible commitment of academic staff time because it is effective

pedagogically, in terms of what students learn as a result. And these points hold good both for prior experiential learning and for current experiential learning organized by institutions as an integral part of degree studies. The points hold good because students can be so powerfully motivated. And that is why for many students it can be claimed that experiential learning when incorporated into the work of academic institutions offers a superior education. In essence, experiential learning is a particularly striking form of learning to effect.

Notes

1. As evidence from Napier and Huddersfield Polytechnics testifies.
2. *The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning* – Report of a CNA A Development Fund project conducted at the Learning from Experience Trust by Norman Evans (CNA A, 1988). Participating institutions were: City of Birmingham Polytechnic; Bristol Polytechnic; Essex Institute of Higher Education; Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic; Polytechnic of North London; Sheffield City Polytechnic; Stockport College of Technology; The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton; Middlesex Polytechnic and Thames Polytechnic.
3. *Access to Higher Education: non-standard entry to CNA A first degree and DipHE courses* (CNA A, 1984).
4. CNA A (1990) *CATS Newsletter*, June 1990.
5. Morris Keeton (1978) *Learning by Experience – Why, what, how? New Directions for Experiential Learning*. London, Jossey-Bass.
6. This touches the wider question as to the origins of knowledge in the context of the rapidly changing nature of higher education in the UK. For contemporary discussion see the *Higher Educational Supplement*, Peter Scott: Editions, 9, 16 and 23 August 1991.

10

Improving the Quality of Student Learning through Course Design

Graham Gibbs

Introduction

Research in Europe and Australasia has identified students' *approach to study* as a key variable in predicting student performance and the quality of learning outcomes. Whether students take a *surface* or a *deep approach* (attempting to reproduce subject matter or understand it) has a profound effect on the quality, structure and permanence of students' learning. This research has also identified the features of course design which foster a surface approach, often inadvertently, or which can be used to foster a deep approach through deliberate and purposeful course re-design. A project entitled *Improving Student Learning*, sponsored by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNA A), has studied a wide range of attempts to move students from a surface to a deep approach and has provided detailed case studies of the processes of change involved. This chapter describes the background research and one of the case studies in order to illustrate appropriate course design changes.

The chapter explores the potentially damaging impact on course delivery, and hence on students' approaches to studying, of the worsening staff: student ratio and increasing class sizes in the UK. It will point to course design strategies which hold out most promise of retaining quality in learning whilst the unit of resource declines. It also emphasizes that a focus on teachers' performance, highlighted by annual appraisal, observation of teaching and superficial teacher evaluation undertaken to satisfy academic audit, is unlikely to orient change appropriately. What is needed is a clear focus on course design with a conceptual grounding in research on student learning.

The CNA A project: improving student learning

Research on how students learn in higher education, how they develop and change, and what influences their approaches to learning, has over the past 15 years provided a coherent, rich and illuminating picture (cf. Ramsden,