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Title: Workers researching the workplace using a work based learning framework:
Developing a research agenda for the development of improved supervisory
practice

Date: 2010

Originally published in: Impact: Journal of Applied Research in Workplace E-learning

Example citation: Talbot, J. (2010). Workers researching the workplace using a
work based learning framework: Developing a research agenda for the development
of improved supervisory practice. *Impact: Journal of Applied Research in Workplace
E-learning*, 1(1), 169-182

Version of item: Author’s post-print

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/115588>

Workers researching the workplace using a work based learning framework: developing a research agenda for the development of improved supervisory practice

(Forthcoming 2009/10) *Impact: Journal of Applied Research in Workplace E-learning* 1 (1).

Abstract

The paper is case study of academic practice in respect of the supervision of research in the workplace by distance learners using a Work Based Learning (WBL) framework. Key aspects of the WBL are described including the role of technology in delivery. Drawing upon tutor experience at one institution and knowledge of practice elsewhere a series of conceptual and practical issues are raised as the basis for a planned research exercise to identify commonalities and differences in approach among practitioners. Ultimately, the purpose is to improve the relevance and application of workplace research by practitioners.

Keywords Work based learning; workplace research; e-learning; academic community of practice; academic supervision; practitioner enquiry

Introduction

While there is a growing body of literature on learning in the workplace relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which employees, as learners, conduct research projects in the workplace and in particular the way in which their learning is facilitated by tutors. This paper examines the issues in this respect where learners are engaged in a Work Based Learning (WBL) programme of study, delivered at distance using a combination of e-learning and face to face to face delivery. The paper presents a case study of practice at one institution, the University of Chester in the UK, as the basis for collaborative research with colleagues in partner institutions.

Informal workplace investigation is integral to many reflective assignments in WBL but more formal research methods are also taught and systematic investigations carried out as part of graduate and undergraduate learning pathways, as in conventional programmes. It is these more formal investigations, carried out by learners in the workplace, which the author delivers and supervises and which form the basis for an attempt to provide a starting point for discussion around the conceptual and practical issues involved in facilitating workplace research by practitioners from the tutor's perspective, as the basis for more formal investigation with colleagues in other institutions.

The Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) Framework: Underpinning Principles

The WBL framework at the University of Chester, the Work Based and Integrative Studies programme (WBIS) is one of a number of WBL learning programmes which operate in countries such as Australia, the USA and UK (Boud and Solomon 2001; Raelin 2008). It was developed by a team of tutors in the late 1990s. Enrolments began in 1998 and there are currently just under 1000 WBIS learners following a variety of learning pathways within it. WBIS is informed by a number of theoretical and political developments from a time when there was a remarkable coming together of developments in the field of learning theory but which also coincided with an interest in the facilitation of formal learning in the workplace

(Department for Education and Employment 1998; Eraut et al 1998; Sutherland 1998; Billet 2001).

Important underpinning theories include that of Andragogy which holds that adult learning preferences are significantly different from children and young people. Adults are motivated by such things as a 'need to know', especially as this relates to solving problems in their lives (Knowles et al 1998). Other important and related constructs include Situated Learning theory, where it is assumed that knowledge for most learners is context bound (Lave and Wenger 1991) and Action learning which holds that learning stems from doing and experiencing that which happens around us (Weinstein 1995). Defining knowledge in terms of the learners' own experience rather than the subject interests of tutors has resulted in WBIS being trans-disciplinary rather than subject specific. This is not to say that WBIS seeks only to capture tacit knowledge: just as classroom knowledge requires authentic practice so practice requires explicit support (Wenger 1998). WBIS uses other learning constructs developed in the mid and late 1990s such as the idea of learning from reflection (Schon 1987; 1992) and the use formal cyclical models of reflection, developed by (among others) Kolb (1984), Burrows (1995) and Gibbs (1998).

A distinctive feature of the approach of WBIS tutors is the inculcation among learners of reflective practice. No particular model is advocated. Instead learners are directed to a variety of writings on reflection, usefully summarised by Moon (2000). Reflective practice is not encouraged simply as part of a programme of accredited learning. It is also seen as the basis for on-going learning and forms part of a wider commitment among tutors to the idea of learning as the basis for professional practice and lifelong learning (Field 2006). An important aspect of reflective practice is that it moves beyond thought to action. WBIS is explicitly designed to facilitate improved performance in the workplace.

Within Fuller and Unwin's (2002) five models of work based learning, WBIS performs a variety of roles but it is principally designed to bring formal instruction to social learning in the work place as the basis for reflective practice and hence altered actions. Individual pathways of learning are constructed for all levels of learning in the context of higher education. WBIS is also used to enable the accreditation for employer delivered learning and has also been franchised to other educational institutions.

WBIS in Practice: Devising Learner Pathways

The WBIS programme is a 'shell' framework and therefore the subject of validation and review not the individual learning pathways learners construct within it. This enables tutors to tailor learning to the needs of the individual or groups of learners without recourse to cumbersome and time consuming validating procedures. Within the framework learners can begin and end their studies as they wish. Some pathways, such as those for housing practitioners, are constructed with groups of other communities of learning interest. Other pathways are tailored to the needs of individual learners or in some cases, those of an employing organisation. Learners, provided they meet standard academic entry criteria, determine not only the content of their programme but also the award and title they obtain. All exit awards have negotiated titles with the suffix (WBIS) in parenthesis. This is to make clear the object of study is the specific practitioner learning, not the method. Examples include FdiG Housing Practice (WBIS), MA Regeneration Practice (WBIS) and so on.

Learners on the programme can study modules which have been developed specifically for WBIS or any module in the University, provided it is relevant and at the appropriate level. Individual learning needs can be catered for through the use of project modules or, if there is sufficient demand, new modules are developed on request. There is a rolling programme of module accreditation to accommodate changing requirements. Tutors can therefore adapt to the needs of new learners without the need for time consuming validations.

Another important aspect of WBIS is the active use of academic credit. In common with most other UK universities, Chester uses a system of credit accumulation based on 20 credit

modules. This is the equivalent of 10 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits. A Bachelor degree is the equivalent of 360 credits (180 ECTS). It is the credit system which enables the extensive use of the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) either certificated or experiential. Up to 50% of academic credit can be obtained using APL for any named award, such as a Bachelor degree. Experiential credit can be awarded either at the beginning of a learning pathway or during it, by for example, submitting artefacts generated in the workplace (such as reports) together with a reflective commentary.

Learning Strategies and the Learner Experience

A key feature of the programme is the emphasis on work based learning. Work based learning is now an established feature of many university programmes in the UK (Nixon et al 2006). Learning at work is recognised as a diverse activity, incorporating informal experience and short term training, as well as the more formal learning associated with a university programme (Institute of Personnel and Development 2000). Within organisations, it is widely regarded as a key element of Human Resource Development (Beattie 2006).

The first module learners usually complete, *Self Review and Negotiation of Learning* is designed to inculcate the values of reflective practice and sensitise the learner to their learning needs and preferred learning style. Within the module students conduct a self assessment of past and present achievements, as the basis for assessing their learning needs. From this they develop their intended learning pathway on the programme. In addition to developing their Pathway Rationale, learners are also introduced to literature in respect of learning preferences and critical reflection, usually using the device of reflection upon a critical incident (Brookfield 1990). They learn to engage in reflective practice by applying formal theorising to a critical workplace incident. The module is designed not only to enable the learner to think about their learning needs but also to begin to adjust mentally to the process of critical, workplace reflection in the context of their practice. At this stage, any applications for Accredited Prior Learning (APL), either Certificated or Experiential are considered. Hereafter learners can complete modules in any order, provided it is coherent and relevant to their needs.

The determining principles of learning are that it should be flexible and based around the needs of the learner. Tutors do not determine the content of the learners programme with combinations of core and optional modules. The choice on WBIS is far wider and almost open ended. The role of the tutor is instead to assist the learner to identify their learning needs and devise an appropriate pathway with an underpinning rationale so they can obtain formal academic credit bearing qualifications. Embedded within this process are a number of related objectives, such as enabling the learner to understand their own learning preferences, inculcating reflective practice as the basis for lifelong learning and assisting learners to discover more effective ways of working by a process of active, internal dialogue. In this sense tutors regard the process of learning as *negotiable*: the aim to identify needs and translate this into effective learning.

A distinctive feature of the WBIS approach is the intimate connection with workplace practice. In a typical WBIS module, the learner is introduced to a body of theory and wider literature and then asked to interrogate their practice. From the learners perspective the relationship with theory becomes much more immediate than is the case on conventional programmes. They select those theories/models which are relevant to their needs and use this as the basis for an internal dialogue, based upon their own practice and that of colleagues. In this way learners are encouraged to reflect upon their current practice as a means of improving performance. Unlike conventional learning where the emphasis is solely on knowing, in WBIS the intention is to focus the learner on *doing*.

Programme Delivery: e-learning

One of the key requirements of the programme is to meet the needs of learners both in terms of content and delivery. E-learning enables the delivery of consistent, convenient and low cost learning to the workplace (Brown et al 2006). A feature of the programme is therefore the development of a series of dedicated Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), hosted on the University's intranet system. In addition to a VLE for general WBIS students, VLEs are developed for particular cohorts or groups of learners, such as Housing practitioners. Each VLE contains specific learning materials developed for the relevant learning pathways as well as links to a variety of other sources. These include electronic books, parts of books scanned in, e-journals and other relevant web sources. For each module, learning outcomes and learning opportunities are specified. For most modules there is also a Theory Document specifically created for the module, which summarises those theories and models appropriate to the learning outcomes. In addition, all other features, such as assignments, are on the VLE. Submission is also electronic. The VLEs attempt to meet all learner needs and there are facilities for on-line discussion. In practice, these have not been well used and the VLE, like most of its kind is text dominated, asynchronous and essentially uni-directional (Walsh et al 2003)

The requirement for minimum time away from work has greatly restricted face to face contact between learners and between tutors and learners. To overcome isolation learners are allocated a personal tutor and there is a subject tutor for each module. Tutor support is available on-line or by telephone. Workplace support is provided by means of a personal mentor. Peer learning is encouraged wherever possible and if an individual employing organisation requests it, the tutor team provides additional study workshops. In addition, regular peer events are organised, visiting one another's workplaces and dealing with learning issues. As with many essentially on-line programmes we recognise the importance of a 'blended' approach, incorporating a variety of learning experiences, including face to face experiences (Elliot 2002; Singh 2003; Graff 2006; Hughes 2007).

Programme Assessment

Assessment is regarded not as separate to the learning process but its most important element. Most assessments are individually negotiated formal reflective reviews, related to the learning outcomes for each module. In effect, the learner, in consultation with the module tutor, devises their own assignment. Learners are encouraged to read the learning outcomes and Theory document and then consider ways in which they can relate materials to their own experience, which should form the basis for their assignment. Submissions can be in many forms, including traditional essays but could also include workplace artefacts with a brief reflective commentary.

Learners submit drafts for formative assessment, as the principal mechanism for facilitating cognitive development (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). In addition to evidence of subject mastery and application, tutors seek to encourage enhanced communication skills, as well as the enhanced ability to synthesise, conceptualise, analyse and so on. Formative assessment is fundamental to adding value over and above conventional training programmes by non-accredited providers.

One of the limitations of a work based approach is that it assumes the learner is engaged in a wide variety of situations and activities upon which to reflect. In practice many on the programme perform fairly limited work roles. Assignments therefore always present learners with the option of work based or work related assessment. *Work based learning* is appropriate where the learner is engaged in an activity and therefore able to reflect upon it in the light of formal theories, models and empirical evidence which are supplied as part of the learning resources. *Work related learning* is suitable where the learning is knowledge based/contextual or where the learner is acquiring knowledge which will be applied in future. Learners are always encouraged to engage with work based learning as much as possible to ensure relevance. Learners are encouraged to reflect not just on what they have learned but

what they will do. Submission is flexible in the sense that students are free to negotiate their own pathway and deadlines.

The WBIS Community of Practice

The WBIS tutor team is comprised of around 10 Full Time Equivalent posts, the majority of whom are indeed full time. Tutors do not all work on the same pathways, nor are learning facilitation roles identical. Some tutors deal with one pathway only, others many; some work on different campuses or never work on campus; some are heavily engaged in e-learning, others more face to face; some use highly unusual assessment practices, others are quite conventional; some have teaching only contracts, others teach and research; some are engaged in developing and delivering content, others more in accreditation.

The backgrounds are extremely varied. All have had a career outside higher education in a variety of roles. Most have entered without a research degree but even those who have enjoyed careers outside the academy. Some are ex-WBIS students but all have a commitment to widening participation and negotiable learning. All WBIS tutors are also WBL tutors. All assume a degree of responsibility for developing new pathways and finding new clients. There are two sets of regular team meetings: one on learning and teaching matters and one in which the development of the programme, from the perspective of developing new pathways and new clients is discussed.

Recruiting WBIS tutors is not easy for a variety of reasons. Demand from employers tends to be less consistent than demand from undergraduates, so advertised posts are usually temporary. Few conventional academics are attracted. The lack of academic prestige, the trans-disciplinary nature of WBIS, lack of research opportunities and focus on learning relevant to immediate needs are significant barriers. People who have spent all of their working lives in higher education often lack the cognitive flexibility needed; practitioners are rarely sufficiently 'academic'. Other institutions engaged in flexible forms of higher education also appear to find it difficult to recruit (Moran and Myringer 2003)

What is remarkable is that despite the diversity and differences, the tutor team is an extremely cohesive group in a business often noted for its fractiousness. The sense of shared identity and team work is reinforced by a strongly held collective view of practice, to the extent that it can be regarded as a distinctive community of practice within an otherwise conventional university setting. In the UK other WBL communities of practice all appear to be doing something slightly different but there is nonetheless a shared sense of purpose and enterprise, apparent to all whenever people in the field meet. This is the issue which Wenger (2007) refers to as 'Practice as Locality': within the broader WBL community of practice WBIS is distinctive by virtue of its focus on individual (as opposed to cohort) learning, negotiability and flexibility. The closest parallel is the WBL framework, *Learning Through Work*, developed at the University of Derby (Minton 2007).

Research methods and Research Projects in WBIS

Facilitating formal research projects in the workplace embodies all the principles and practice of the WBIS programme as described. For those on undergraduate and postgraduate pathways a Research Methods and Research Project are mandatory although it is possible to complete a more traditional dissertation. Learners complete a single Research Methods module (20 credits) in which they are encouraged to develop a research question which will result in the generation of data to help solve a practical problem in the workplace. This in turn is related to a feasible investigative method as the basis for a double or treble module (40-60 credits) Research Project.

The mechanism for delivery is a combination of group workshop, e-learning and individual tutorial. The first stage for most learners is attendance at a day induction, held in a workplace. Workshops run throughout the calendar year and usually involve attendance between 6-12 learners. The purpose of the day is to sensitise learners to the requirements for formal workplace investigation and encourage each individual to focus on the problem or issue which requires systematic investigation. Learners are also guided through on-line learning materials provided by the tutor as well as the on-line resources provided by the University by a specialist Distance Librarian. In our experience many of the University's resources, such as Electronic Books, selected Gateways and e-journals are underused by learners in favour of the ubiquitous Google search. Some learners do not wait for a workshop and simply begin using the online resources.

The dedicated Research Methods online module resources are designed for ease of navigation but are designed to guide the learning through the process in a logically sequence focussing on the definition of problem and translation into working title as the key starting point. An important part of the VLE is a dedicated Theory paper outlining the range of methods available to the practitioner researcher as well as indicating when it is appropriate to use a particular method, validity and ethical considerations. A distinctive element of the approach is the equal weight given to intelligence gathering (using existing data) and research (generating new data). In many cases the former is a more efficient method of systematic investigation as the basis for action than the latter and many organisations notoriously under-use the information they have.

Learners are encouraged to consult with employers/ mentors about the informational requirements of the organisation to minimise the risk of producing findings mainly of interest to the individual learner. In some cases (where the learner is self employed or paying their own fees for example) this may not be appropriate but in most cases dialogue is essential to ensure relevance. It also fulfils a practical function: where there is organisational buy in, learners can legitimately combine study and work time. Generating a report in the workplace also assists in assessment. The learner can submit the report with a short reflective commentary, which is up to half the normal word count for a submission.

Following the initial induction learners utilise the on-line resources and thereafter learning is facilitated via individual tutorial, as is the case with conventional students. This is a combination of telephone, e mail and face to face, depending on the needs of the learner and proximity to the University. Most learners submit their Research Methods assignment and Research Project separately but some are combined. The majority link the two submissions but occasionally learners treat them as separate exercises and they are unrelated one to another.

Practitioner Research in WBL beyond Chester

The concept of practitioner research is hardly new and has been the subject of debate within professional education for over twenty years. However, as with many other academic discourses, discussion has usually taken place within the confines of subject disciplines and specialisation, often using different terminologies to describe what is essentially the same activity. The burgeoning literature on Knowledge Management for example is largely aimed at practitioners in order to both capture existing organisational information and generate original data to further the aims of the organisation (Dalkir 2005). Although most applications are in business, it is applied in a variety of settings, including law enforcement agencies (Dean and Gottschalk 2005), training and development organisations (Clardy 1997) and educational institutions (Jones and Sallis 2002). Outside of Knowledge Management separate discourses relating to practitioner research exist for a variety of professional groups such as teachers (McKernan 1996), counsellors (McLeod 2000) and policy analysts (Spicker 2006).

What is striking is the diversity of methods and approaches to practitioner research. Some of these differences reflect the needs of particular occupational groupings. Policy analysts for example, are likely to use methods designed to elicit data beyond the individual and

organisation, such as polling and deliberative methods. A dividing line is that between those for whom the practitioner and their actions is the object of research (reflexive practice) and those for whom the object of enquiry is the organisation. The literature for professionals such as teachers and counsellors enquiry is heavily skewed towards the former where the self is the central object of investigation. For such groups the term 'action research' is often used to describe an approach where a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the actor in improving or refining his or her actions (Sagor 2005). Professionals also appear to have a strong preference for qualitative methods such as heuristic enquiry and narrative methods (Clandin and Connelly 2000; Etherington 2008; Moustakas 1990; Kohler Reissman 2008). By contrast most of the literature aimed at businesses has a strong organisational focus often involving more traditional quantitative methods (Davenport and Prusak 2000; Frappaolo 2006; Jashapara 2004; Waters 1998). Policy analysts are likely to be more heterogeneous in their approach, using qualitative and quantitative methods (Rihoux and Grimm 2006)

WBL is still a relatively new academic enterprise and there are only a small number of active academic centres, largely focussed on delivery of learning rather than research. The result is that there is a corresponding paucity of published research on practitioner enquiry in the context of WBL. A recent issue of the *Journal of Workplace Learning* is dedicated to practitioner research but only two of the papers, (Costley and Armsby (2007) and Workman (2007) - all from the University of Middlesex) discussed the issue in terms of a WBL context. The former noted the strong preference for learners for qualitative investigations whilst the latter is principally a discussion on the compromised nature of the researcher embedded within an organisation, as opposed to the traditional 'outsider' status of researchers. Other than that there is little discernible literature, at least in the UK.

Experience at Chester reflects that at Middlesex; WBL students appear to exhibit a strong preference for qualitative methods. This may reflect the nature of WBL, where there is strong emphasis on reflexivity and personal learning. At Chester there is some disquiet among tutors of the limitations of this approach and the relatively narrow use of methods available. As at Middlesex, there is also an awareness of situations where practitioner research has been compromised because it is critical of management practice. However there is also a feeling among tutors there are many other unresolved issues in respect of WBL practitioner research. The following section explores these in more detail.

Workers researching the workplace: issues for WBL supervisors

The first issue is that the range of supervisory practice is simply unknown. Beyond this case study there is no account of the ways in which Research Methods for WBL is taught- mode of delivery, use of ICT, content (qualitative and quantitative), delivery at different levels, support for learning, resources available for analysis and so on.

The second set of issues can be termed conceptual. At Chester Research Methods for WBL is regarded as being distinctive from traditional university approaches to research so that delivery is local and specific. This may not be the case in all other institutions where Research Methods is delivered by non-WBL tutors in a standard way. However, WBL tutors at Chester have debated the nature of that distinctiveness and practice has evolved over a period of time. One of the internal debates is the boundary between what might be called 'normal WBL' learning, which utilises formal models of reflection and often involves investigation and 'Research based WBL' where there is more explicit emphasis on systematic investigation. This is critical because there is uncertainty over whether methods considered appropriate for the former, such as Learning Logs and First Person Action Research are really suitable for the latter. There is therefore a question about what is distinctive about WBL research in the workplace and the boundaries with other forms of WBL investigation.

This highlights a second conceptual issue: just what can be regarded as 'practitioner research' in the context of WBL? The Chester view is that the term 'research' is not especially useful and other terms such as 'practitioner enquiry' or 'systematic enquiry' are probably more appropriate. This reflects a view that practitioners are highly constrained by time and resources so that often the most efficient method is not to research at all in the sense commonly understood by academics and professional researchers. Instead it often makes sense for the practitioner to use of existing information rather than generate wholly new data- that is engage in intelligence gathering rather than research. Intelligence gathering, broadly defined incorporates a number of methods for the systematic gathering, analysis and presentation of existing data or information for a defined purpose in the workplace. Intelligence gathering may precede or even accompany applied research and like it, is the basis for purposive action. It can be hard (quantitative) or soft (qualitative), open (freely, publicly available) or closed (restricted); it can use organisational data sets or that derived from published sources (such as official statistics); it can be secondary (using existing sources) or primary (newly generated). A committee of enquiry can generate powerful intelligence but it is not research method as commonly understood. 'Practitioner enquiry' as a term is better able to accommodate the broad range of activities of research and intelligence gathering.

A third conceptual issue to explore with is the relationship between contextualised learning and generalisable findings. The assumption at Chester is that the knowledge generated through WBL research projects is likely to be situated and therefore not necessarily generalisable beyond the individual/ organisation. However, especially where learners are registered for higher degrees, practitioner enquiries can generate findings with application beyond the immediate context, possibly for other practitioners and organisations and also, exceptionally, to theoretical knowledge. While this may occur it is not the purpose, just as theoretical developments are not directly intended to inform any particular course of action.

A fourth conceptual issue concerns enquiry validity. There is not space here to discuss all the issues this raises so discussion will be restricted to one aspect only. As already mentioned many practitioners regard themselves and their own actions as the object of enquiry: WBL encourages this; colleagues in other institutions also regard the individual and their actions to be the principal object of investigation. At Chester this is discouraged by tutors. This has enormous consequences for internal validity (Denscombe 2003). There is a tendency, amongst all the emphasis upon reflection in WBL to regard the self as unproblematic. For some learners WBL is a mechanism for self discovery as an end in itself and the approach to research is correspondingly highly personalised so that the self is the sole object of study. Writers such as Baumard (1999, p 81) have commented on the difficulties entailed in this approach: 'To become one's own object of knowledge is no easy task. Actors are ignorant of their own mental states and reticent to recognise them and so deceive themselves about their own desires, motivations and emotions'. Two well known examples from the social psychology literature illustrate the point. Practitioners, like anyone else, may experience cognitive dissonance by holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and seek to reduce it by rationalising behaviours, beliefs and attitudes (Festinger 1957). As Rigg and Trehan (2008, p278) in the context of a discussion on critical reflection in the workplace express it- 'how could we have forgotten about dissonance?' Personal accounts may be flawed in other ways; for example there is good evidence to suggest the incompetent over- estimate their abilities while the competent under- estimate theirs (Dunning and Kruger 1999). In our experience those conducting investigations into their own actions are rarely aware of the degree their own self belief systems bias their outlook.

A second reason is a concern there may be instances where the legitimate interest of the employing organisation, which is usually paying for the student or if not, are providing time and other resources, are poorly served by the focus of the enquiry. In some instances tutors have felt practitioner enquiries have become exercises in solipsism rather than a genuine contribution to contextual knowledge. Finally, there is a concern that the focus on the self and the actions of others can lead to little useful information: it is simply the wrong end of the telescope and that more telling findings can be made by examining issues at a broader level.

Allied to the worries with extended study of the self is a concern for the preference for qualitative rather than quantitative studies. Tutors do not believe it is never appropriate for a qualitative study to be conducted but there is sometimes a feeling learners do not sufficiently appreciate the power of numbers and under-estimate the difficulty of deriving meaningful findings from methods such as semi structured interviews. To some extent this can be overcome by using examples at Induction from familiar news stories. One recent example has been the management failings in an Accident and Emergency Unit in an English hospital. Complaints about practices were made over many years but no action was taken until deaths (Standard Mortality Rates) per admission were compared with similar units in other hospitals. The excess deaths provided the foundation for further investigation into specific management failures and real changes implemented (Health Care Commission 2009).

The final conceptual issue is the nature of the power relationship between tutor and the learner carrying out a practitioner enquiry. In the overwhelming majority of cases this is not problematic but there are instances where tutors have had concerns about some aspects of the investigations carried out or feel there is an opportunity for a more meaningful investigation missed. Reference has already been made to the preference of some for individual over organisational learning. While some may regard this as non-problematic that employer could be a public body, such as a hospital so the real loser may be patients and the tax payer. Other tutor-learner difficulties have arisen where students wish to research within the paradigm of a non-scientific belief system, such as Neuro-Linguistic-Programming (NLP) or use non scientific models of human behaviour and personality such as the Enneagram. Transferring power to the learner to define their own learning can result in a challenge to the tutor (and by implication the university and academic community) as to what constitutes knowledge.

In addition to these conceptual issues are a number of practical issues in relation to the support of practitioner enquiry in the context of WBL. WBL is by its very nature, open ended. The practitioner researcher can be from an unlimited number of occupational groups and organisations and may conduct an investigation either at the level of individual practice, the work organisation or the wider context in which the organisation operates. The methods advocated for those in business organisations or professional groups are all potentially valid. There is therefore a very long list of methods available for practitioners to use. The question is then how to expose the student to the variety of methods available or whether to select on their behalf. If it is decided to present a large number of methods, a second issue arises: how can this be done and how can sufficient underpinning staff expertise be made available to support the potentially wide range of methods?

There are also issues in respect of the student experience. WBL by its very nature is often distance learning: how is it possible to support learners in terms of inductions and tutorials in an area where it is recognised there is an ongoing need for personal supervision? How is it possible for tutors to provide appropriate support when there are such a potentially large number of methods and sources of information available and where at least some underpinning subject expertise is required? Beyond the role of the tutor, to which sources should learners be directed in a world where there are very few texts on WBL and a very limited number on applied research and next to none on the use of intelligence?

There also practical issue as a result of the extensive use of APL at the onset of a learning pathway. This often means learners at postgraduate level complete their first module and then move straight on to Research Methods and associated Research Project. Obtaining academic credit in this way is highly advantageous to the learner but it may leave them poorly prepared to carry out a practitioner enquiry and the tutor may have to spend a disproportionate time supervising and assisting. There are also doubts as to whether the reliance on e-learning for Research Methods is as effective as traditional face to face delivery; the author has heard WBL doctoral learners at another institution say they could have never have completed had they not previously completed a conventional taught Research Methods module.

Towards a practice agenda

WBL is still a relatively new academic enterprise but in universities like Chester student numbers have increased dramatically in recent years- recording year on year growth of 20% enrolments for over a decade. As learners achieve Bachelor and increasingly, Postgraduate awards, more WBL learners will engage in research projects in the workplace. E-learning is likely to play an important part in delivery but will not supplant traditional supervisory relationships. Beyond that there are a series of conceptual and practical difficulties which tutors must address. It is by no means certain there is unanimity among the various WBL communities of practice even within countries, such as the UK let alone elsewhere. The present paper is an attempt to identify the main issues for further debate and research among practitioners, with the ultimate aim of improving practice to improve the quality of workplace research projects by practitioners.

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