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Workers researching the workplace: the confessions of a Work Based Learning tutor

While there is a growing body of literature on learning issues in respect of Work Based Learning (WBL) more specific work on the facilitation of research (and its supervision) by WBL students is limited.

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 students in the workplace, which the author delivers and supervises and which form the basis for the reflections in this paper.

Although the paper presents a case study based upon experience and candid reflections of a tutor supervising workplace research projects at the University of Chester there are references to experience in other institutions with WBL frameworks. The aim is 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 a precursor to a small research project on the facilitation of WBL research projects in the workplace.

The paper is organised as follows:

- A brief description of the WBL module at Chester (WBIS), its philosophical underpinnings and the community of practice which has developed amongst WBIS tutors
- A description of the way in which the facilitation of workplace research projects has evolved, how it is currently delivered and how it is likely to evolve in the near future.
- A discussion of some of the issues as seen from the perspective of the tutor. Themes for discussion include:
  - How WBL tutors facilitate practitioner enquiry
  - Conceptual issues in relation to WBL practitioner enquiry
  - Practical issues in respect of the above
  - A research agenda

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 work based learning programmes which operate in UK universities. 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 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.

WBIS awards can be obtained with up to 50% Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL), whether certificated or experiential. This enables experienced practitioners to obtain academic credit for their acquired knowledge. This is especially attractive for older learners keen to obtain recognition for years of experience. Younger people, anxious to develop their skills, are more likely to opt for taught content,

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 (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: The Virtual Learning Environment

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 s 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. This can be formalised through a Topic Learning Plan, where the learner indicates to the tutor how the requirements of the assessment will be met. 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 are encouraged to submit drafts for formative assessment. Heavy emphasis is placed on formative assessment as a means of facilitating personal 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 cognitive skills such as 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 can submit artefacts or portfolios of material generated in the workplace, accompanied by a short reflective commentary. Submission is flexible in the sense that students are free to negotiate their own pathway and deadlines.

Work based learning for undergraduates- the WBL module

In addition to facilitating work based learning for adult learners via WBIS, the WBIS tutor team also facilitate and deliver a work based learning module for most second year undergraduates in the University. Work Based Learning (WBL) like WBIS has been in existence since 1998 and involves arranging and overseeing work placements for hundreds of students every spring. As can be imagined this represents a major undertaking administratively and academically. Two of the WBIS tutors are responsible for oversight and delivery of the module while all others, as a matter of contractual obligation, are engaged in its delivery. In addition, other tutors from elsewhere in the university participate in the six or seven weeks the process takes to complete.

The WBL module is not simply a matter of students completing a work placement. As with WBIS, learners are expected to formally reflect on negotiated learning targets. Tutors from elsewhere in the university have to be

inducted into the mysteries of negotiable, reflective work based learning. In addition to providing student support, WBIS tutors are responsible to ensuring tutors are properly prepared and that there is consistency of delivery and assessment.

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'. In this respect we appear no different from other institutions engaged in flexible forms of higher education, who also 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 of people, 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. This is not officially recorded or written down in any single university document so for the purpose of this paper, a definition of practice has been discussed and agreed by the tutor team:

- WBIS attempts to bridge the divide between knowledge located in higher education and that in 'real life', specifically the work place so that both are informed by one another
- It enables individuals to engage with lifelong learning by sensitising them to their learning needs and preferred methods of learning
- It places the learner and their needs at the centre of the learning process
- It attempts to deliver in a way which is low cost, flexible and which recognises the profoundly social nature of the learning process
- WBIS values knowledge from all sources including that of learners and recognises that tutors are principally facilitators of learning; learning is shared between tutors and learners
- It enables individuals to capture their informal, practical experience and reflect on that experience in the light of more formal theoretical knowledge
- WBIS encourages internal dialogue in the learner between informal and formal knowledge as the basis for altered action. WBIS ultimately seeks to transform individuals and organisations.

While the WBIS tutor team is undoubtedly a community of practice within the context of the university in which it is situated, there is an issue as to the extent to which it is distinctive within the wider community of UK work based learning practice in higher education. While all such institutions appear to be doing something slightly different, 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).

Practitioner Research in WBL

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. However what is more striking is the divergence 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 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* was 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 discernible literature in the UK at least.

At Chester we would concur with the findings of our colleagues at Middlesex; WBL students exhibit a strong preference for qualitative methods. This may reflect the nature of WBL, where there is strong emphasis on reflexivity and personal learning but as tutors we are mindful of the limitations of this approach and the relatively narrow use of methods available. We are also aware of situations where practitioner research has been compromised because it is critical of management practice, for example. However it is also our feeling that there are many other unresolved issues in respect of WBL practitioner research.

Some of these are purely practical. WBL is by its very nature, open ended. The student researcher may be from each of those professional groups identified above, as well as a myriad of others, 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 potentially 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 do we ensure there is sufficient underpinning staff expertise to support the potentially wide range of methods?

However this is only one of a number of issues confronting tutors with responsibility for facilitating practitioner research among WBL students. We have obtained a limited amount of funding to help us explore these issues with colleagues in other institutions: the rest of the paper describes the issues that need investigation, from the perspective of WBIS tutors at Chester.

A research project to develop best practice in WBL practitioner research: research questions

In March 2009 the University was awarded a small research grant to investigate how practitioner research for WBL is delivered in established centres and identify means by which practice can be enhanced. Within the research are three sets of issues we wish to pursue.

The first of these is simply to describe established practice in respect of the facilitation of research projects in the workplace on WBL programmes. The focus will be on how Research Methods is taught- mode of delivery, use of ICT, content (qualitative and quantitative), delivery at different levels, support for learning, resources available for analysis etc

The second set of issues can be termed conceptual. At Chester, we regard Research Methods for WBL as being distinctive from traditional university approaches to research so that delivery is local and specific. We are aware this is not 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 our 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 we are unsure whether all methods we consider appropriate for the former, such as Learning Logs and First Person Action Research are really suitable for the latter. We seek dialogue about what can

be regarded as distinctive about WBL research in the workplace and the boundaries with other forms of WBL investigation.

This highlights a second conceptual issue: just what is it we can regard as 'practitioner research' in the context of work based learning? Our collective view is that we do not especially care for the term 'research' and would probably prefer terms such as 'practitioner enquiry' or 'systematic enquiry'. This is because we believe that practitioners, like anyone else conducting any sort of investigation is constrained by time and resources and very 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 activities of research and intelligence gathering.

A third conceptual issue we would like to explore with colleagues is the relationship between contextualised learning and generalisable findings. Our working assumption is that the knowledge generated through work based learning research projects is likely to be situated and therefore not necessarily generalisable beyond the individual/ organisation. However we recognise that 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. However 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 is how we regard issues to do with enquiry validity. There is not space here to discuss all the issues this raises so I will focus on one aspect. As already mentioned many practitioners regard themselves and their own actions as the object of enquiry: WBL encourages this and we are aware colleagues in other institutions may also regard the individual and their actions to be the principal object of investigation but at Chester we try to discourage this. While we believe there are issues (after Denscombe 2003) in respect of construct validity, external validity and replicatability, I will concentrate on issues in respect of internal validity. There is a tendency, amongst all the emphasis upon reflection in WBL to regard the self as unproblematic. For some students 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, by the self. For the tutor, concerned with academic rigour there is what can be called 'the problem of the self knowing'. Many 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 that we are concerned 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 we have felt practitioner enquiries have become exercises in solipsism rather than a genuine contribution to contextual knowledge, to the extent we are considering students to prepare a business case ('who wants this?') before embarking upon an investigation. Finally, we are concerned that the focus on the self and the actions of others often leads 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. Again, it is not our belief that it is never appropriate for a qualitative study to be conducted but we sometimes feel our students 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 address this I have, in recent inductions been citing the example of widely reported 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 withy 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 may concerns about some aspects of the investigations carried out or feel there is an opportunity for a more meaningful investigation missed. The

broader context to this is that WBIS, like other WBL frameworks is explicitly designed to transfer power to the learner to determine their own learning. There are tensions in situations where an employer who is paying for the learning then feels entitled to dictate what that learning should be but in our experience it is more likely to be the case that the learner does not have sufficient regard to the interests of the employer. 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 Nuero-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. Mention has already been made to the potentially enormous number of methods available to the practitioner. If we accept that the argument above, that intelligence gathering is a perfectly valid tool, as are all the methods of the Action Researcher and those used in Knowledge Management the problem of exposure to and instruction in relevant methods is increased exponentially. How in practical terms, can this achieved?

This raises the issue 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?

At Chester we have an additional practical problem but it is likely to be shared by other institutions. Since WBL attempts to give credit for learning from wherever it is derived we can give up to 50% Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL) for any named award. At postgraduate level this means we see learners who have completed one 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. Given the current regulations we can see no easy way to improve this but it might be colleagues elsewhere can help.

A further practical question is trying to determine the most effective means of delivering Research Methods for WBL practitioner enquiry. I have heard

learners who have completed some of the best research projects we receive attribute their success to formal, traditional instruction on another programme. I have heard similar comments at another university from WBL students. I am not sure what the mix should be between formal instruction (often impractical because of the demands of the workplace), e-learning and one to one tutor support and am not convinced we have it right at the moment.

The research project

During the latter half of 2009 another WBIS tutor and myself will be conducting a small scale research project to explore these issues with WBL tutors in other institutions. The project is in three stages:

- A questionnaire survey of WBL tutors to establish current practice in respect of facilitating practitioner enquiry
- A structured day event at the University of Middlesex to explore issues as seen by tutors
- A final structured day event at the University of Chester to attempt to attain a consensus and agree common outputs (such as e-learning materials, writing text books etc)

A final report describing the outcome will ne available at the end of 2009.

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