Guest Editorial

Experiential Learning in Built Environment Education

Neil Harris, Lecturer

School of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building,

King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WA

Email: HarrisNR@Cardiff.ac.uk

Introduction

This first edition of Transactions is concerned with a series of issues of increasing importance within the context of the modern university. These issues may be variously described as including work-based learning, experiential learning, placement experience, live projects or 'real-world' simulation. The increasingly complex vocabulary used to define what was once perhaps referred to simply as 'industrial placement', testifies to the prominence of such concerns. The collection of papers in this issue highlights the highly variable form and character of the different activities that fall under the umbrella term 'experiential learning'. In the papers that follow, a broad interpretation of experiential learning is adopted that incorporates the sandwich year, multiple and short-term placements, research and travelling, and university-based project work sponsored by agencies and employers. The profile and relevance of experiential learning has been greatly enhanced by the Dearing Report and the Government White Paper on higher education. These documents reflect a wider, societal concern about the qualities of a university graduate. Renewed emphasis on the employability of graduates and their possession of sought after professional and transferable skills are changing the ways in which universities relate to their students. The Egan Review further confirms these trends.

My personal experience of these issues comes principally from being responsible for placing Cardiff planning students with an employer as part of a traditional sandwich course. The course is a combined BSc City and Regional Planning and Diploma in Town Planning, leading to a qualification accredited by the Royal Town Planning Institute. The national debate about employability, skills, relevance and the opening of a discussion of alternative models and approaches learning from and in the workplace, is to be welcomed. I am not alone, I know, in having to discover by trial and error what is good practice in supporting students through this kind of learning experience. As much as the traditional lecture, 'year out's were once a feature of the curriculum administered with little reflection on their strengths and weaknesses and little understanding about how to harness their potential. I am pleased to observe that practices are now changing – Cardiff, for example, has a university working party on placement learning where good practice and common concerns are shared across disciplines.

The five case studies in this issue of Transactions provide the same kind of triangulation points in reflecting on one's own experience in these matters. I was both challenged and reassured in reading them. Others had made the same discoveries as I had. There are new ideas too that I shall consider transferring to Cardiff. The papers also prompted me to think in a more critical way about the purpose and value of experiential learning. I return to this issue later.

The Collection of Papers

The papers in this first edition of Transactions provide a series of case studies on a variety of experiential learning exercises in built environment education. The accounts address education in architecture, planning, housing and construction management courses in the United Kingdom. Terry Russell of the University of Edinburgh, provides an interesting account of the evolution of architectural practice and education, highlighting how universities have come to acquire the role of incorporating professional experience into their courses. He highlights some of the tensions in ensuring quality professional experience and monitoring students' experience in the workplace. The pressure on resources in effectively managing placements is alluded to in the case study, but its main positive message is the tremendous support for the course that evidently exists among employers. Chris Hill and Martyn Pearl, in case studies conducted at Sheffield Hallam University and Oxford Brookes University respectively, consider experiential learning in construction management and housing studies. Hill raises the fundamental tension between the view of universities as institutions of learning and as centres for training, claiming that the concept of employability acts to resolve any tensions. Employability is merely one attribute of 'graduateness'. Hill also returns to the fundamental question of the value of placements and highlights a number of issues, all of which are interestingly little to do with the academic experience or 'education'. Meanwhile, Pearl encourages us to look at some of the practical and managerial aspects of placement organisation, including ensuring that the workplace is a safe, enjoyable and effective environment that is conducive to experiential learning. The paper by Alan Maddocks of Loughborough University, highlights how information technology can be harnessed to positive effect in monitoring students' experience in the workplace and encouraging them to reflect systematically on that experience. Finally, Janet Askew of the University of the West of England, suggests how agency projects, in which students work on a discrete piece of work framed by an external organisation (such as an environmental or voluntary group), can be a positive alternative to the traditional placement year. I trust that each paper will offer something to those interested in experiential learning in all of its different forms and will stimulate reflection, debate and enhanced practices.

Some Common Themes and Key Issues

There are a number of common themes across the five papers. The more significant of these with respect to the design, management and assessment of experiential learning are as follows:

- *The effective use of information technology.* Much experiential learning, particularly in the case of longer-term placements, occurs 'at a distance'. Students may be placed with an employer elsewhere within the United Kingdom or, in some cases, overseas. Remaining in contact with students and reducing the perception of remoteness from the university are important and can be assisted by the effective use of IT. Maddocks highlights in his paper how web-based technologies allow for the dissemination of information to students on placement, but also more significantly, allow students to develop an evidence base for their various skills and learning, while on placement.

- *The definition of learning outcomes for experiential learning.* The more precise definition of learning outcomes from a student perspective is a positive feature of the 'professional' turn in modern university life. This has probably impacted on traditional teaching methods more than on placement learning. It is useful, therefore, to read in each of the papers, accounts of how specific learning outcomes for periods of experiential learning have become standard practice. A properly crafted learning outcome will help students to navigate their way through what is typically a rather unstructured learning experience. It will help them choose between alternative work assignments; look for the more useful experiences within those assignments; evaluate the significance of their experiences; identify knowledge gained and knowledge gaps; contextualise experience within a broader map of knowledge; and assist with the production of evidence to verify its attainment.

- *Increasing awareness of rights and responsibilities.* In a comparatively short time the rights and responsibilities of employers, students and university have become very clearly defined. This reflects legislative requirements as with health and safety and increasingly professional attitudes in Higher Education practice. Informality is no longer possible or acceptable. Several of the papers refer directly to, or allude to, greater specificity of procedures for harassment; the university's expectations of employers in fulfilling their responsibilities; and the general duty of care to students. This appears to be an unavoidable development, yet it significantly increases the overheads of delivering experiential learning.

- *Quality assurance of placement learning.* Related to a number of the preceding points is the wider issue of quality assurance. This is particularly challenging in all forms of experiential learning. The key issue is assuring the quality of learning that is beyond the direct control of the university and its internal QA procedures. In at least two of the papers, the availability of sufficient placement opportunities of suitable quality is recognised as being constrained by the willingness of employers to take students or offer time in supporting project work. Are we compelled to accept whatever is available, regardless of the quality of the learning context? If so, how do we address issues of fairness, standards, and appropriate teaching style and content

when students have very different work-based experiences? These are practical issues that have to be negotiated in each specific case. They highlight the contingencies of incorporating placements or experiential learning into a programme of study. A related issue is the cyclical nature of work based learning opportunities. There is reasonable demand for planning placements at the present time. This is a consequence of recent Government decisions on the funding of local planning authorities; buoyancy in the property sector; and a general under-supply of qualified planners. Yet it has not always been like this and will not always be so. Assuring students of the quality of placement learning in very different circumstances to those currently prevailing may prove to be difficult. Issues arising here include the best way to prepare (train) work-based tutors and supervisors and building contingencies into curricula to cater for students unable to secure placements.

- *The requirements of professional bodies.* Many university courses that include an element of experiential learning do so because it contributes in some way to the requirements, objectives or professional practice period of a professional body. The professions are increasingly setting out explicit frameworks for the recording of professional experience. This inevitably impacts on placement learning, either through the mechanisms for recording experience or the definition of learning outcomes and the evidence used to support them.

The value of experiential learning

I conclude with a brief critical reflection on the value of experiential learning – offered to stimulate readers to ask probing questions of the papers and of their own practices. The first question I pose is whether universities, in emphasising experiential learning, are absorbing some of the proper functions and responsibilities of employers and professional bodies. In reading some of the accounts that follow, I was struck by the highly practical nature of some of the activities. Readers may wish to consider whether some of these might be better described as training, rather than education and better undertaken in the workplace after graduation. I return to Chris Hill's comment on the value of placements. Students who have completed some kind of placement, he says, find it easier to secure employment, attract higher starting salaries and even secure higher grades at university. My interpretation of these points is that they do not necessarily relate directly to the educational experience and the attainment of 'graduateness' in its fullest sense (beyond employability). Even the last point – securing higher grades – may not relate directly to educational factors. I have always thought that the real value of placements and possibly other forms of work based learning is in transforming the nature of post-placement learning. It is about far more than delivering skills. Work based learning (especially long periods of it) is about helping students mature; see connections; develop all important tacit knowledge; understand the context in which the codified knowledge learned in the classroom makes much more sense. A significant work-based placement should somehow be qualitatively different to the learning experience that preceded it and should transform the educational experience that follows it. In condensed

course structures, where there is pressure on curriculum space, we have to think carefully about the difference between using work placements to enhance the quality of learning and using them to try and deliver skills that could better be learned on the job. In this respect I would challenge Pearl's statement that the acid test of a placement is the marketability of students at the end of the year. The better acid test might be the increased depth of learning experienced in the post-placement part of the curriculum – and the longer term impact on intellectual development and professional competence. There is a connection here with the contrast between problem-based learning and the use of problems to illustrate and test the application of knowledge. In problem based learning students are confronted with a problem which they have to understand. This drives them to discover relevant knowledge. This can be far more powerful a learning experience than applying more abstract knowledge to solve a problem. The issue is a temporal one – when to expose students to an experience that makes them constructively confront their own lack of knowledge: before, after, or during a more formal process of knowledge acquisition? Presenting a problem as an *ex-post* applied test has its role in summative assessment. It misses the chance of shaping the acquisition of knowledge, however. A problem presented too early runs the risk of demoralising the student, or forcing trivial or uninformed answers. A well placed placement throws up as many questions as it answers and helps students reformulate their own opinions and questions about their subject – including their assessment of their own and others' skills and the significance of those skills in the greater picture.