

## **Professional Artefacts: Embodying Ideas in Work Based Learning**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to present and examine the addition of a 'professional artefact' to the course requirements for the BA Honours Professional Practice (BAPP) (Arts) programme at Middlesex University.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

This paper takes a case study approach using reflection, indicative theories and consideration of student work to evaluate the introduction of the 'professional artefact' into the BAPP (Arts) curriculum. Following pragmatist and phenomenological descriptions of the lived experience as embodied (Dewey et al., 1989; Merleau-Ponty, 2002) and using learning models based on experience in the workplace (Boud, D. and Garrick, J., 1999), our methodology takes the work based principle of 'experience as knowledge' to examine the impact of the professional artefact on students learning.

### **Findings**

The professional artefact has proven to be a useful way for the learners on the course to reflect on the purpose of their own study and the ways in which work based learning can be incorporated into their practice through embodied 'ideas'.

### **Practical implications**

We suggest that the inclusion of a professional artefact to the curriculum provides a flexible means for bridging academic and workplace learning. The inclusion of the professional artefact could be recommended as a strategy for other work based learning programmes.

### **Originality/value**

The added value for professional practice is that the professional artefact provides a flexible and creative means of communication for emerging and establishing workplace professionals.

**Keywords:** embodiment, work based learning, professional artefact, work based pedagogy, curriculum development, professional practice, ideas, artefact, higher education

**Article Classification:** Case study

## **Introduction**

In this paper we examine the curriculum planning for the BA Honours Professional Practice (BAPP) (Arts) programme (work-based learning) at Middlesex University, with a focus on the introduction of a 'professional artefact' as part of the course requirements. The BAPP (Arts) curriculum uses a foundation of transdisciplinary practice (Gibbons et al., 1994; Costley and Armsby, 2007) that seeks to connect academic study to situated knowledge in settings beyond the university. As work based students co-produce and integrate various forms of knowledge in the workplace, the notion of the professional artefact offers an apposite way to communicate learning within the work environment. As a part of the case study we have used ethnographic reflection from participant observation, indicative theories and consideration of student work in order to evaluate the introduction of the professional artefact into the curriculum. This paper has been written at the beginning of the process to capture the development stage of planning the curriculum and presented as an evaluative self-reflection aimed at sharing our process with others.

The work based principle of 'experience as knowledge' underpins the BAPP (Arts) curriculum, drawing on pragmatist and phenomenological descriptions of the lived

experience as embodied (Dewey et al., 1989; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). We do not see the professional artefact as simply a practical element that illustrates knowledge, but rather a way to exhibit an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and work based activities. Therefore knowledge in the workplace is not limited to the dichotomy of the theory and practice model but rather the workplace is where “the new relationships of theory/practice, mind/body, work/learning are...being actively explored and contested” (Boud and Garrick, 1999, p. 6). This premise promotes active engagement as a way of acknowledging that as embodied beings students’ ‘knowing’ is a multi-layered and diverse experience (Akinleye, 2012).

One of the incentives for planning change within the curriculum from previous academic models of BAPP (Arts) was the limitation of text-based explanations alone for reporting on work based research. This older model often led students away from the very process of exploration or meaning making that their professional cultures valued. The professional artefact was developed to address this problem. It is a practical manifestation of the students’ learning experience that associates learning to concepts like Merleau-Ponty’s ‘interworld’ where “meaning and materiality are inseparable” (Simonsen, 2012, p. 15). The professional artefact allows for knowledge to be expressed in the multiple languages of professional practice and can communicate with greater clarity to work based audiences.

This notion of the professional artefact broadens the conception of the annotated product for work based learners. It presents the understanding that knowledge is embodied along with the realisation that what you think and what you do in the workplace is not contingent on a separation of theory and practice. We think this interpretation of the professional artefact taken from our practitioner research has implications for providing more flexible assessment materials for students taking work based learning courses and may have implications for how a similar process can play a more important role in other undergraduate research inquiries.

### **BAPP (Arts) Background**

The BAPP (Arts) programme at Middlesex University facilitates work based learning students undertaking their final year of degree study. The programme was based in the School of Arts and Education but is now in the School of Media and Performing Arts, and is validated as a cohort programme by the Institute of Work Based Learning. It is a part-time course that seeks to weave study, reflection and inquiry with the practical day-to-day activities of the students’ workplace. Students arrive in the programme with prior learning experiences in the form of certificated practical courses or lived work experiences that are accredited by the university. Professional partners, such as Trinity or the Imperial Society for Dance Teachers, have played a part in developing the progression agreements for the programme.

Students are emerging and establishing professionals (paid and unpaid) from various art sectors such as dance, performing arts, or graphic design; many work in a freelance or self-employed capacity. Some students work within wider contexts beyond the arts, finding the need to diversify their work practice and experiencing career changes. BAPP (Arts) is structured into three modules that are based on generic learning outcomes that allow students to explore what they are doing within their chosen professional practice. The course culminates in a practitioner research inquiry contextualised by the students’ professional work environment. This inquiry is assessed through documentation and reflection on the activity presented in three forms: a written critical review, a professional artefact, and an oral presentation to staff and peers.

An arts-based professional practice course had previously been developed within the School of Arts and Education at Masters level (Durrant, 2009). Initially in 2009 Durrant and Akinleye redeveloped the first module for the undergraduate cohort of BAPP (Arts). Subsequent changes they made to the curriculum embraced the connectivity of social media (Middlesex University, 2009; Bryant et al., 2013). This new curriculum design aimed at acknowledging that work based students were less physically present on campus but still needed a space to discuss and explore ideas with peers. The importance of a design that allowed for meaningful communication within the day-to-day lives of students was highlighted. The design drew on notions of connectivism (Siemens, 2006; Downes, 2005) through the use of public forums to encourage collective engagement and reflection; forms of delivery included public blogs, wikis, work-related photographs and short films created by staff and students and posted on-line. The current academic team, including Nottingham and McGuinness, resumed the development of ideas for the programme using a wide variety of work based and higher education sources.

Overall the new BAPP (Arts) curriculum design sought to acknowledge the wide range of experiences and sites of learning that students were drawing on in their work based study. Further focus was placed on engaging the workplace as a site of knowledge through graduate and professional skills, as well as using the course to expand ideas that informed career development. Communicating ideas beyond the university to students' work environments emerged as a vital component for students to meaningfully link their study with their work practices. The notion of the professional artefact therefore became a part of these developments.

### **Rationale for the Professional Artefact**

Given that learners on the course are often emerging or establishing professionals, many working in freelance capacities, the concept of a professional artefact needed to encompass the students' findings from their final professional research inquiry while signifying an on-going engagement with learning. This way of thinking incorporated the creative nature of arts-related practice that acknowledged the relevance of a 'work-in-progress' as well as more traditional 'products' from the workplace. Similarly the idea of an 'object' needed to acknowledge the principle of embodied experience. Gibbs defines the 'embodiment premise' to be a mind-body and a language-body connection.

People's subjective, felt experiences of their bodies in action provides part of the fundamental grounding for language and thought. Cognition is what occurs when the body engages the physical, cultural world and must be studied in terms of the dynamical interactions between people and the environment (Gibbs, 2001, p. 2).

By melting the divide between mind-body, cognition and sensation the relevance of the thinking and process related to a 'product' from the workplace is acknowledged. Similarly the principle of Merleau-Ponty's embodied experience suggests that producing tangible evidence of 'sociocultural life-world' events (Simonsen, 2012) celebrates students' capacity as agents to activate their own experiences of work and learning. "Returning to the lifeworld means rethinking subjectivity in a way which does not consider it an abstract, transcendental ego, but a subject that, immersed in existence, is thoroughly corporeal, intersubjective and historical" (Simonsen, 2012, p. 22).

Production in or for the workplace has been recognised as a part of final project evidence in work based learning (Brennan and Little, 1996; Costley and Armsby, 2007). However, the professional artefact was conceived of to recognise the potential limits of a written report in representing a “portfolio of work based 'products' with evaluative commentary drawing out what was learned” (Brennan and Little, 1996, p. 78). The professional artefact emphasises the presence and importance of the practical and *embodied* elements of the communities of practice the students inhabit rather than just being seen as a way for students to leave the course with a prototype product.

Developing the curriculum for the third BAPP (Arts) module that introduced the inclusion of the professional artefact happened in stages and was team directed. The immediate academic team members involved in BAPP (Arts) curriculum development included Alan Durrant, Adesola Akinleye, Bakr Zade, Peter Bryant, Rosemary McGuinness and Paula Nottingham. Originally for BAPP (Arts) students, the final project work was represented by a twelve thousand-word report. The BAPP (Arts) academic team perceived that the written ‘report’ document, while capturing traditional academic presentation of knowledge, left some of the embodied learning of practice unexpressed. There was a need to allocate assessment in the final module to allow students to articulate how knowledge gained from their embodied experience in the workplace had informed their research at a non-verbal level.

Staff had begun by acknowledging that thinking did not necessarily ‘take place’ in the writing of a paper, particularly for professionals whose work contained physical or visual languages. As emerging professionals part of what students were learning to negotiate in the work place was its formal mode of thinking which was often different from processes they had learnt ‘at school’. It was important not to extract the ‘thinking’ process of the work based inquiry out of the context of the workplace in order to document it. It was felt that in the past this had resulted in students analysis of their work based inquiry as being a theoretical academic ‘hoop’ they had to learn to jump through rather than a meaningful reflection on their professional arena. The team felt that the revised ‘writing up’ of the final research inquiry should be repositioned to become something more meaningful and useful to practice while still containing elements that had appropriate levels of assessment. The revised assessment criteria still maintained the required embedded learning outcomes for level six (BA Honours level) that followed standard guidelines set by the Institute of Work Based Learning at Middlesex University.

Because the research inquiry was contextualised as an embodied experience, an activity of inquiry, it was felt that the experience should not rely solely on the longer written paper that had been the previous requirement. The team discussions and reflections on student experiences indicated that something that was derived from the professional field itself was also needed. This meant that a ‘plural representation’ of the inquiry process could be introduced to attempt to bridge the gap between physical experiences and verbal descriptions (Akinleye, 2013). A second element of a professional artefact could allow for engagement with communication that is acknowledged within embodied approaches or draw on embodied metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) to draw links between the knowledge acquired through the research activity and the on-the-ground professional context in which students could go on to use this knowledge.

The work based nature of the inquiry clearly places a value on practical experience yet the previous sole requirement of the twelve thousand-word report had limited the students to the theoretical tool of text. It was felt that to undertake the practical activity of a work based inquiry, but be constrained to using only the structure of

written words in order to report back the learning, undermined the epistemological positioning of the whole course. The previous twelve thousand-word paper requirement was shortened to a six thousand word 'critical review'. The critical review asks students to summarise and explain the experience from the inquiry work in academic terms, specifically explaining elements of practitioner research analysis and critical reflection on the learning process. The professional artefact, weighted with a three thousand word count equivalency, required that the student conceive of a mode of documentation that would be targeted to a work-related audience specific to the students' field of professional practice. Developing the professional artefact is a more tangibly embodied process because it draws on experiences that cannot be expressed in text but can be expressed in *action*.

### **Development of the Professional Artefact within the Curriculum**

In the new curriculum's second module (the inquiry project planning) students start reflecting on and considering the implications of their planned inquiry activity in terms of personal ethics and professional expectations; ethical guidance continues to be provided as they design their research inquiry. The inquiries are presented as mainly qualitative although mixed methods are sometimes used. Qualitative methodologies, particularly in terms of embodiment, have to address how the experiencing self can be communicated in the research documentation (Hammersley, M., Atkinson, P., 2007; Sparkes, 2002).

The new curriculum's third module (including the critical review and professional artefact) has now been designed so that students critique the intent, activity and learning of their inquiry. The professional artefact addresses the opportunity for students to tackle the expression of the multi-layered nature of their learning. While writing could still be chosen as a communication mode, an alternative form of communication also allowed for the students' inquiry to be contextualised by the work environment itself. The professional artefact could be in the form of a movie, a dance, a draft curriculum or a business plan. Limiting the inquiry report to an academic paper could mean that within the workplace the conclusion of the students' inquiry appeared impractical or even indecipherable within the professional context. By asking students to submit a professional artefact along side the academic paper, there was a space for a pluralist approach to the communication of knowledge. This was a shift to encourage students to see communication as a network of elements that address different aspects of the embodied experience (Akinleye, 2012). This approach also harmonised with the value placed on network structures in connectivist theory that had informed the initial areas of curriculum development on the course.

### **Assessment Criteria**

The new curriculum's third module handbook outlines the assessment criteria for the students' inquiry. The core attributes mentioned are the use of social media as a way of reviewing the inquiry process with peers, an awareness of the relevant field of practice in terms of theories and discourses, and demonstrating understanding of these bodies of knowledge. The professional artefact is mentioned as a way of evidencing this understanding and thus linking a range of engagements across a multi-faceted approach to the communication of knowing. The professional artefact is therefore not a sovereign (finished product) but a part of a matrix of expression that seeks to acknowledge and respect the possibility of a wide range of learning experiences. The professional artefact is expected to demonstrate the students' reflection on the purpose of their own learning and the ways in which work based study can be incorporated into the practical activity of their day-to-day interactions.

This approach can be explained and examined as a part of the oral presentation in order to clarify how the professional artefact has been conceived and used in the workplace.

The assessment criteria for the professional artefact are complemented by how it links with the two other elements, the written Critical Review and the Oral Presentation. These three elements create a matrix of expression. The Critical Review is an explanation of the process including an evaluation and analysis of findings within a practitioner research project as well as critical reflection. The Oral Presentation relates to delivering an explanation to the academics and peers on the programme. The re-aligned aspects of the assessment mean that communicating with professional peers is a valued part of the process. The new curriculum's third module handbook outlines the assessment criteria for the professional artefact as an element of the inquiry.

Part 2: Professional Artefact - created to communicate to your professional audience, can contain words and images that explain the professional inquiry process that you have undertaken, and the findings that are meaningful for your audience (Middlesex University, 2011, p. 4).

The description of how the professional artefact is assessed continues in the module handbook. Students developing their artefact are asked to share their practice with the BAPP (Arts) network online and/or in the workplace.

The professional artefact should be created with a professional audience in mind, but as the work will also have an academic audience, your presentation approach may need to be explained. For example, you may opt to create elements for your professional audience that make use of the academic elements of the inquiry.... Planning, designing and executing methods of communication might take time, so the thinking about the presentation and dissemination of your findings, e.g. via the BAPP (Arts) network, should be considered as a part of the process. (Middlesex University, 2011, pp. 14-15).

The idea that the artefact should entail an explanation about how it suited a professional audience required the team to develop strategies for supporting students in divergent thinking. The creation process of the professional artefact encourages the students to evaluate the process of their inquiry using different points of view. Supporting strategies put in place involved requiring students to share ideas with peer BAPP (Arts) students' online using special interest groups and blogs, and interaction in the workplace with professional colleagues. Evidence of discussion of the inquiry process then becomes a part of the assessment for the professional artefact. The concept of the professional artefact is not assessed as a separate piece of performance, text or piece of visual art product, but the meaning of the artefact and the way in which it was used or communicated in the workplace are the main considerations. These considerations might be related to practice-based researchers desire that "research outputs and claims to knowledge be reported through symbolic language and forms *specific* to their practice... [because] epistemological content is embedded and embodied in practice" (Haseman, 2010, p. 148). However, while the audience for the artefact is often arts-based in the case of BAPP (Arts) students, the main rationale for the professional artefact is that it is appropriate to the professional audience for which it is planned. Similarly, this approach would apply to other practice subject areas beyond the arts.

## The Professional Artefact as a Learner-centred Strategy

The curriculum development has supported the work based learner-centred approach that encompasses the view that education is more than acquiring instrumental knowledge for employment, and is aligned to a concept of learning where individual workplace development is encouraged (Nottingham, 2012). The artefact allows the learner to speak to a sector related audience that might be seen as more employer-centred but also has elements of disciplinary knowledge. This 'hybrid' quality (Walsh, 2006) is one that has emerged from developing the pedagogy of the new curriculum. The pedagogy is related to working with personal goals as well as various audience groups, identifying disciplinary knowledge but also how this knowledge is being purposed for job-related functions. It also follows recognised practitioner practices for work based learning pedagogy such as insider-research (Costley, Elliot, Gibbs, 2010) and developing learning that addresses creative strategies for the workplace (Raelin, 2008).

While the origin of the term professional artefact came from BAPP (Arts) location in the creative and cultural sector, the term 'artefact' is one that Armsby (2011) has also used to describe work based products based on evidence yet requiring contextualisation using reputation, status, significance, worth, and value. Armsby (2011) has further noted that artefacts still needed to be seen as evidence of workplace practice, which can be compared to other products and processes used within work based learning pedagogy. This view of the artefact is one that has been useful to engage with the ideas of the BAPP (Arts) professional artefact.

Similarly, the ideas embodied in the professional artefact relate to the aspirations of higher education (Ranson et al., 1996) that equate learning to cultural renewal and citizenship rather than educating purely for labour market prerogatives. While BAPP (Arts) supports workplace practice, the connectivist principles underpinning the initial redesign of the curriculum embeds social learning elements that are thought to be an important aspect of supporting individual learning experience.

The examined life is the key mechanism of learning to learn and thus the key to entering the deeper layers of learning about the nature of agency. Such learning develops as *practical reason* which involves: deliberation upon experience to develop understanding of the situation or the other person; judgement to determine the appropriate ends and course of action (which presupposes a community based upon sensitivity and tact); and learning through action to realise the good in practice (Ranson et al., 1996, p. 15).

The learners in the programme are in the early stages of their professional careers and as such are undertaking transformative experiences of which the learning process can be a part. Mezirow points out that "perspective transformation is a mode of adult learning that neither learner nor educator is able to anticipate or evoke upon demand" (1991, p. 202) but it is essentially the learner who must be in control of the process of adopting the new learning. It is up to the student, as a professional and practitioner, to develop a professional artefact that connects their learning to progressive elements in their workplace activity. The process of learning often becomes a part of changes or aspirational work-related planning that is transformative in nature. Like the use of appreciative inquiry within the workplace, the professional inquiry introduces a cyclical process that is intended to develop lifelong learning skills that look for solutions rather than simply problem solving (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). Adding the professional artefact as part of the final assessment

was in order to recognise students as embodied and to acknowledge the transformative potential of their learning.

It should however be stressed that the presentation of the professional artefact is not judged on its artistic merit. The final piece is assessed by how its content relates to the professional inquiry and how this is communicated to a professional audience. Resonating with this, the use of visual and audio-visual elements are often based in the use of constructivist methodology, and are seen as a way to improve the ways in which work based learning practitioner research can be approached. Heath, Hindmarch, and Luff suggest that “video-visual recordings are increasingly used to support research that examines the situated activities and interactional organisation through which knowledge, skills and practice are shared and disseminated” (2010, p. 8).

### **The Student Experience**

As this development of the curriculum was first given in September 2011, at the time of this paper relatively few cohorts of students have engaged with the new changes. Examples of the professional artefacts from students are varied and dependent on the professional inquiry that each individual is doing. Many students, while desiring to do something that will help their own professional roles, have chosen a peer audience rather than one directed at higher management levels; this decision might indicate the importance of professional communities of practice to early career practitioners. It also underlines the course emphasis on being a learner-centred programme, rather than one in which employers develop a programme based on workforce development (Nottingham, 2012).

Students’ professional artefacts thus far include:

- A timetable and curriculum planning for a three-year vocational musical theatre course,
- A ‘blurb’ book that describes tips on professionals transitioning from a dance to media presenter role, accompanied by a taster tape,
- A poster that illustrates the practitioner research and was endorsed by the organisation as a way of disseminating information about the auditioning process in the dance studio,
- An audio tape representing various musical styles and their use by current practitioners,
- A presentation for younger dancers about injury and career choices.
- A choreographic process shared with local users in a community arts programme

Some of the professional artefacts act as starting-points that could then be reviewed by managers in the workplace before being applied to workplace practice. Students have shown a great depth of reflexivity as they approach the task of creating the professional artefact. The following examples represent students’ descriptions of the thinking process for their professional artefact.

Example 1:

I have had some thoughts on my professional artefact right from the beginning of the inquiry process. I have been quite lucky with my topic in that my artefact seems to be an obvious and fitting choice to show the outcome of my findings. I am investigating into how to



make a successful transition into the television industry. During the inquiry process I have gained lots of *tips*, knowledge of the industry and advice from television professionals and people who have been successful in this area. Taking all this on board, I am in the middle of creating my new television show reel as my professional artefact. Not only will this serve a purpose for this course but will also be useful for me to use after the course in order to develop my career, hopefully into television (Less, 2011).

Example 2:

I understand that the artefact... should help us in our professional practice... I have been approached for my ideas for a new show and put together a brief.... Therefore, for my professional artefact I would like to submit two pieces. The first part will be the planning, initial ideas and development for a new theatre. My inquiry has studied business failure and what went wrong for the company. The planning and development section of my artefact will summarise the results of my inquiry and how I came to the ideas for the new business and why.... The second part of the artefact will be a business plan for the new theatre (Weir, 2011).

Example 3:

The inquiry [into community dance practise] process has been a weaving of ideas and themes as they emerged from my interviews. I have started to also see community dance weaves people's personal relationship with dance into a wider context. For my professional artefact I am thinking of choreographing a dance with community dance users that creates a weaving of dancers and ribbons. I feel that in doing the dance with users I will be presenting my findings and process in a form they can understand and discuss more easily than a written report. They are used to physical projects, working together and reflective evaluation of the dancing they do because this is how many community dance projects work. The artefact will be two things: the actual event but also the video of it, which can be used to explain my process to other people (Douglas, 2012).

As these explanatory extracts indicate, students have developed sophisticated ways to create their own versions of the professional artefact by using emerging findings from their inquiries. The examples given in this paper indicate that what the students produce is seen as something that will be useful to them as well as a projection of their understanding in a language that other professionals will more readily recognise and appreciate. The process of development is seen as integral to the things or events that have been produced, placing the emphasis on the learning that has occurred while undertaking the process.

This change in the curriculum underlined the epistemological principle of *action as meaning*, and *knowledge in doing* (Dewey, 1997) that had unexpected implications on how students valued their work on the course. The professional artefacts have genuinely become starting points for further development and the experience is valued as transformative (Mezirow, 1991). Students graduating from the new curriculum also appear to be more aware of the potential of applying their academic learning in the workplace.

Creating a professional artefact had the practical effect of getting students to think about how their inquiry could benefit colleagues from a wider community of practice where the knowledge expressed in an academically styled research paper was less accessible. Respecting professional modes of communication (and thinking) means that students' work appeared more relevant within their professional community. The students' use of professional communities of practice to interact with their university study, in this case from the creative and cultural industry sectors, meant that expertise examined within the inquiry process could be embedded back within the work context.

## Conclusion

If we consider the student to be embodied, then attention must be paid to how they can synthesise and document the multi-layered nature of their learning. The redevelopment of the BAPP (Arts) professional artefact has better enabled the programme to integrate the formal requirements of higher education with experiential learning principles. Although this paper has been written at the beginning stage of introducing the professional artefact, early indicators suggest that students found this practical application of learning within a real world environment helped to embody their academic ideas within their professional context. We commend the professional artefact as a strategy for other work based learning programmes as it provides a flexible means for bridging academic and workplace experience. The significance of this change in the curriculum is one that we will continue to evaluate in further research.

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