Context and Debates

Competence or capability: Work-Based Learning and Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract

There has been increased pressure upon academic institutions to further develop Work-Based Learning (WBL) within the curriculum. Media practice education already includes a significant amount of Work-Related Learning (WRL) although perhaps this is not always made evident in course documents or through specific approaches to the delivery of courses. This paper will begin by reviewing the published definitions and requirements of WBL and look at some of the issues that arise in relation to media practice education. Working with Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs), for example, to deliver WBL can be problematic and is not always completely beneficial to students as an experience of the work place: this raises issues particular to media practice education. Using 'Live Projects' to simulate WBL can perhaps offer a more supported and effective learning experience within the context of Higher Education. The paper will look at potential ways that the methodology of Problem-Based Learning could be utilised to work with and assess 'Live Projects', offering guidance on moving from 'project based' to 'problem based' project work.

Introduction

This paper will look at Work-Based Learning (WBL) in the context of developing a Foundation Degree in Media Production & Development at University College Chichester. Though this was the starting point for this investigation it quickly became clear that WBL outcomes are central not only to the development of Foundation Degrees but to the delivery of practical media production education in general, where practical work is often required to mirror professional practice and students are expected to develop the kind of key transferable skills sought by employers such as communication, teamworking and problem solving.

There does however seem to be some confusion as to exactly what the scope and meaning of the term WBL might be. Skillset, the Sector Skills Council for the Audio Visual Industries (SSC) have yet to produce clear guidelines setting out their understanding of the term WBL. Those guidelines they have produced such as the definitions to be found in their Foundation Degree Frameworks seem at odds with the academic project as

shall show later. In fact it appears that the whole notion of WBL is riven with contradiction and confusion.

There are also significant problems associated with the delivery of WBL within an industry dominated by Sole Traders, Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Micro Businesses that make delivery of WBL a crucial issue in the design of a Foundation Degree or for media practice education in general. One solution to many of these problems might be to utilise 'Live Briefs' or 'Live Projects'. Where employers are directly involved in the setting up, running and assessment of student projects but the delivery and management of these projects is undertaken in an HE environment.

However this approach is very different from that set out in the Skillset framework documents which state specifically that in regard to WBL:

> This learning must take place in a real world environment (not an FE or HE environment) and be of sufficient duration for the individual to be able to demonstrate competency against learning outcomes
>
> (Skillset 2004)

Where as the QAA 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education' (QAA 2001), in section nine on placement learning takes the position that the 'The types of placement available to students take many forms' (QAA 2001) and offers a flexible approach on the understanding that different forms of WBL will be appropriate to different industrial sectors suggesting only that placement learning:

> Typically takes place outside the institution with the support and cooperation of a placement provider
>
> (QAA 2001)

Though there is an expectation that the form of placement learning undertaken is explicitly described in terms of learning outcomes and is fundamentally integrated into a programme of study within a Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Clearly there are some contradictions in these respective positions as well as some difficulty with definitions. There are also problems around exactly where or what a real world environment would be and who or what a placement provider might be with little or no guidance on how potential partnerships with employers might be academically structured. There seems to be little recognition on the part of the SSC that there is a lot of good practice and expertise within HE as well as direct experience with employers and with students that could be acknowledged and utilised in the resolution of these issues. The aim of this paper is to highlight some of this good practice and initiate a discussion that might go some way towards resolving some of the differences between the academic and SSC positions. In particular the paper will review the way in which Problem Based Learning (PBL) might be an approach that could address issues associated with delivery of WBL outcomes in an HE context.

The Context: Employers say that graduates are not 'job ready'

The DfES (DfES 2002) states that WBL should not be confused with Work Placements suggesting, the following definitions should be applied:

Work Placement = an experience of work for a short duration;
WBL = a structured learning experience leading to accreditation;

If we understand this to mean that WBL is 'learning undertaken at work' (DfES 2002), and that this is a fundamental aspect of the development of work place skills. Then the problem for HEIs is that where there are no local large enterprises with whom to build a relationship these institutions are effectively excluded from delivery of WBL orientated programmes of study. How do you for example persuade a sole trader, SME or Micro Business that they really need to get involved with education; that there will be real benefits to their business? How do we as educators incentivise employers to work with us within the constraints of HE institutional practices?

The definitive statement from Skillset that WBL 'must take place in the work place not an HE or FE environment' (Skillset 2004), suggests they would prefer that there should be a significant work place context for education along the lines of an apprenticeship or sandwich course. This sets up a series of problems for HEI's working outside of the major production areas or away from the BBC or ITV company headquarters. It also begs the question as to whether HEI's should be doing the employers jobs for them. Should we really be responsible for training the staff of major broadcasting institutions and adopting the burden of cost that comes with this strategy?

There are also important differences in pedagogic approach highlighted by these respective positions. In their Foundation Degree Frameworks Skillset suggest that the defining principles of a Foundation Degree with WBL at its core would be:

- More relevant application of skills development;
- Exposure to real-life working problems and situations;
- Balance between practical and interpersonal skills:

The QAA Qualification Benchmark Statement goes some way towards endorsing this position suggesting that skills and knowledge need to be 'applied in a work context' (QAA 2004). So there is some common ground after all.

This however is the point of departure. Skillset's detailed and extensive National Occupational Standards (NOS) which form the basis of their approach to learning and teaching focus on competencies describing for us exactly what it is that employees might be expected to do in the work place in clearly delineated technical terms or knowledge statements. It is this difficulty of reconciling the NOS knowledge statements with the QAA benchmark statements that is at the heart of the problem. In trying to reconcile the two approaches an antagonism arises between the 'operational competence of the workplace and the academic competence of disciplinary knowledge' (Onyx 2003:126).

In contrast to Skillset's 'competency' approach to learning and teaching the DfES statement (DfES 2002) on the assessment of WBL talks in terms of:

CAPABILITY - includes underpinning knowledge and understanding and development of personal skills and relevant qualities;

and

PERFORMANCE - includes the skills and qualities they demonstrate in practice.

While the Skillset produced NOS have provided us with a useful guideline for developing competency based education this approach is perhaps not appropriate at degree level. The problem with the NOS is that it is:

Largely based upon narrow definitions of specific tasks and in outcome terms on identifiable and tightly defined performance criteria.

(Stephenson 2003:88)

Where as personal capabilities 'such as courage, risk taking, intuition, sharing, acceptance of personal responsibility, flexibility, initiative, self confidence and values' (Stephenson 2003:88) are not recognised and not assessed even though it is these basic capabilities that make for 'job ready' graduates.

So we find ourselves presented by Skillset with a terminology that restricts what we do as media practice educators to a narrow definition, potentially excluding many institutions and many aspects of existing good practice. Good practice that is clearly producing 'job ready' graduates despite the industry's protestations to the contrary. We are left wondering then, how to proceed and in what terms we should frame the delivery and assessment of WBL.

What is Problem-Based Learning and can it help?

Perhaps we need to start by rethinking media practice education and start to reframe what it is we want to achieve, what the value to students of practical projects might be, how this might fit with the need to identify WBL related learning outcomes and how we might start to link these outcomes directly into the needs of employers without reducing the core enterprise of HE to one of simple competencies. A new mode of expression, or terminology for the discipline could aid us in this project to find some common ground between the many conflicting points of view and perhaps Problem Based Learning (PBL) as an educational methodology can help us with this project.

It is possible that perhaps PBL can offer us a language for talking about practice. A language that offers the possibility of managing and assessing the kind of learning that goes on in a placement learning or WBL context; a language that describes what we already do well and assists us to do it better. PBL can be thought of as:

> ...Both a curriculum and a process. The curriculum consists of carefully selected and designed problems that demand from the learner acquisition of critical knowledge, problem solving proficiency, self-directed learning strategies, and team participation skills. The process replicates the commonly used systemic approach to resolving problems or meeting challenges that are encountered in life and career
>
> (Barrows & Kelson 1993)

Savin-Baden suggests that PBL should be thought of as an 'educational strategy or even as a philosophy rather than merely as a teaching approach' (Savin-Baden 2004:5). She specifically explores the distinction between:

> PROBLEM SOLVING - linear exploration of subject which is tutor led and knowledge based
>
> (Savin-Baden 2004:3);

and

> PROBLEM BASED - problem scenarios are utilised in a way that encourages students to engage with and manage their own learning
>
> (Savin-Baden 2004:3).

Thus the focus is on the process rather than the products of learning and knowledge. Since PBL is founded upon an open-ended and ill-structured problem or situation that has no 'right' answer. The tutor is responsible for facilitating learning strategies rather than delivering 'teaching' and the students become active participants and critically involved enquirers who own their own learning experience. Students are encouraged to '...use reasoning abilities to manage and solve complex problems' (Savin-Baden 2004:11). Thus students use intuition to solve set problems in a manner that 'mirrors play activity' (Stephenson 2003:88) and so has the benefit of being fun, while involving a significant degree of exploratory or experiential learning. Isn't this how we learn in the industry - 'on the job'? Isn't this also at the heart of media practice education?

One of the varieties of approach discussed by Savin-Baden includes instances where students may meet with a client in some form of simulated format that allows for a brief to be given and students to engage in a free discussion or enquiry with that client to establish the nature of the brief/problem (Savin-Baden 2004:5). This kind of WBL activity is very suited to the kinds of projects that students might undertake on media practice courses throughout the UK where employers are included in the designing of briefs, at the diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment stages. Practical projects that follow this method are sometimes referred to as 'Live Projects' or 'Live Briefs' and follow the basic PBL dictum that problems must be 'authentic' not academically generated, and they must reflect real life or students don't engage as deeply with the activity. This need is synonymous with the requirement for media practice education WBL projects to reflect the real world of professional media production.

Project-Based Learning	Problem-Based Learning
Outcome requires students to produce some kind of artefact for assessment	Outcome is *open ended* and not necessarily subject to assessment
Assessment by a 'crit' or some other form of connoisseur assessment	*Peer or self assessment* is used, by reflection on action or other student centred approach
The tutor supervises	The tutor *facilitates*
Students are required to produce a solution or strategy that solves the problem	Solving the problem may be part of the process however the focus is on the process of *problem management*
Tutor led curriculum within the life span of the project	*Students determine* the kind of learning they wish to undertake perhaps utilising budgeted resources
Students come together in groups for the period of the project	Students form *learning teams* for the duration of the course and may undertake many problem-based scenarios together (thus they have to work through difficulties)
Students are given structured projects that are linked to pre-determined outcomes	*Real-Life problems* may be set in advance but outcomes are not pre-determined

(Table from Savin-Baden 2003:19)

Clearly project based work is already a fundamental element of media practice education, and the 'Comparison Table' (Savin-Baden 2003:19) below usefully sets out some clear distinctions between 'project based' and 'problem based' learning approaches. Some of the elements in the table below may seem familiar to you because many of us already use some

form of PBL in what we currently do. In fact it is highly likely that you are already using PBL in some 'hybrid' form or another.

Indeed many experienced PBL practioners regard project based learning as synonymous with PBL, the difference between us is that we, as media practice educators don't frame what we do as PBL and perhaps we don't assess specifically in terms of capabilities. Focusing as we often do on assessing the end product, using what has sometimes been referred to as 'connoisseur assessment' to make judgements about the aesthetic qualities of student work rather then exploring the learning experience of the student. The nature of WBL requires a movement away from product towards process and PBL offers some insights into how we could accomplish this. It establishes a principal where capability rather than competence becomes the benchmark for success and assists us in offering the following challenges to students:

- To engage in their own independent critical enquiry;
- To manage their own resources;
- To take ownership for their own learning.

Refocus & Reframe: process as outcome
Preliminary research into the topic would suggest then, that PBL has a lot to offer in the reconceptualisation of media practice education and WBL. It gives us a useful methodology for looking at how we can shift the focus of assessment away from the final product and towards the process of production. PBL provides us with a framework for involving employers in the process of delivery and it puts the onus for learning onto the students.

As an academic discourse PBL leads us towards an assessment strategy that reflects what the professional does in their practice, which is largely process-based professional activity, underpinned by appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes or capability. Stephenson suggests that the 'defining characteristic of capability is the capacity for autonomous learning and development within the context of change' (Stephenson 2003:88). Following this line of argument the Davies Review defines enterprise capability:

> As the capability to handle uncertainty and respond positively to change, to create and implement new ideas and new ways of doing things, to make reasonable risk/reward assessments and act upon them in one's personal and working life

> (Davies 2002)

Early DfES (DfES 2002) statements seem to agree with this approach suggesting that some of the ways in which capability and performance can be assessed are through projects, reflective reports, portfolios, and case studies amongst others, many of which we already use to assess student participation in media practice projects. All of these tools fit well with the PBL approach, and fit well with the academic project of media practice education.

Clearly there is a need to involve employers in the process of setting up and delivering WBL projects. Just as there is a need for media practice projects to reflect a real world business context. It would seem however that the kind of skills defined by the term capability can be developed within an academic setting as part of an integrated WBL approach and that exclusion of the HE environment from the delivery of WBL may be counter productive.

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