Preparing students for the professional workplace: who has responsibility for what? †

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This paper considers the concepts of curriculum which underlie existing workplace based learning programs and advocates that clearly articulated and meaningful statements about the nature of the learning that occurs in such programs are couched in an appropriate discourse. It argues that universities must take the lead in meeting demands that educational institutions be more accountable for the learning of their students by developing curriculum statements that are consistent with an emancipatory model of curriculum. Such statements should specify the frameworks in which content and even assessment can be negotiated with individual students rather than being specified in advance and should demand that students take responsibility for their own learning (Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2007, 8(2), 121-129).

Keywords: Professional workplace; curriculum; accountability; framework; Australia

A quick survey of university handbooks, past and present, indicates that the number of undergraduate field placement courses designed to enable students in various professional fields to gain practical skills in the workplace is proliferating. These courses provide students with an experience of the workplace culture: the traditions, rules, sanctions systems, and expectations that new professionals are asked to accept and respect. They have the function of providing a preinduction experience prior to the student's graduation and provide students with an opportunity to test the theoretical knowledge learnt at university and to put it into action in the complex and sometimes pressurized environment of the real professional world. Schön (1990), Knowles (1986) and Boud and co-workers (see, Boud, 2001; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Boud & Walker, 1991) have all shown that this proliferation of workplace based courses has occurred as professions have increased their demands for credentialing, and as new professional occupations emerge in the 'knowledge society'; this trend shows no sign of abating.

We seem to be in a transition phase where 'internship' or 'work-placement experience' is being given a much more central place in the university curriculum and there are demands that such courses become more tightly described as programs of learning with conceptual foundations that underpin their content and delivery. In Australia, for example, the Federal Government is now demanding that universities be more accountable for the quality of such courses and requires all stakeholders to address prescribed requirements (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005). Curriculum statements now need to be able to

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formalize the responsibilities of each of the participants and articulate a tighter rationale that still allows for built in flexibilities so that existing practices can continue while new and perhaps more adventurous ones can be developed.

The details of the actual experiences that constitute each workplace-based course tend to be tightly bound to the context of specific workplaces and often what is to be learned, the sequence of that learning and the details of the role and responsibilities of supervisors has to be negotiated separately for each particular placement organization (Le Cornu, 2000; Maidment, 2003). Consequently, this paper consists firstly of an examination of the generic concepts of curriculum that are best suited to work-integrated learning and then of the responsibilities of all stakeholders in what we may call an 'action-curriculum'. We then discuss recommendations emerging from a workshop conducted in the Australian Cooperative Education Network (ACEN) conference held on the Gold Coast in October 2006 in which academics and industry partners from a variety of sectors around Australia were asked to develop a set of educational responsibilities for the stakeholders and suggest alternative ways in which they could be met.

CONCEPTS OF CURRICULUM

Broadly, a 'curriculum statement' is an attempt to specify 'what is to be learned' and is a way of describing and exercising some kind of quality control over the 'curriculum' itself: that is, the action that will constitute the process of learning in the program (Stenhouse, 1975).

Using criteria developed from Habermas's (1972) concept of 'knowledge constitutive interests', science educators Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) conducted a phenomenographic analysis of the conceptions of curriculum held by a sample of academics in Australia. They developed a set of categories to use in this analysis that formed a hierarchy with each level in the pyramid building upon the last but adding new features. The first category was based on what Habermas called the *technical interest* in which "…ends are set,…means are known or knowable and…the path between them is a direct one…" (Cornbleth, 1990, p. 14, cited in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). This underpins curricula concerned either with propositional knowledge alone or, with 'knowledge and skills'. The assumptions underlying these kinds of curricula are that learning outcomes can be identified objectively in advance, stated in a course description as 'objectives', and then measured according to predetermined criteria which are also specified in advance. Such curricula have a relatively narrow focus and a limited scope; they are utilitarian in nature and they form a base level from which professional learning can emerge later.

Fraser and Bosanquet's next category was built around Habermas' concept of the *practical or communicative interest*, in which the learning *process* becomes at least as important as any particular subject matter. Here curriculum statements are more concerned with framing the learning environment and with reflective practice than with specific technical details. The learner's tasks and activities are still constrained by the teacher's goals but students are expected to communicate their needs, interests, and the relevance of their discoveries to them as the *process* of the negotiated curriculum develops.

In the third category, curriculum serves an *emancipatory interest* when the learner begins to stand alone, and take charge of the learning. The teacher's role changes so that he or she challenges the student's taken-for-granted understandings and participates in the learning endeavor as a collaborator. The student is responsible for the direction: changing previously held world views and his or her identity as a person. Such a notion of curriculum has a seamless interface with genuine enquiry in that it is focused on ongoing learning that is

directed by the learner. In this way it "…assumes a process of meaning making which recognizes meaning as a social construction…" (Grundy, 1987, p. 116), and learning becomes a series of research activities in their own right. 'Teaching' is then a collaborative and mentoring, activity rather than simply the transmission of information.

These levels of curriculum are echoed in a number of other theoretical models: Miller and Seller (1990, cited in Van Gyn & Grove-White, 2004) identified three similar general orientations used by educational systems; and Van Gyn and Grove-White (2004) analyzed these showing that each reflects a particular theoretical perspective. They claim that the *transmission* model is derived from behaviorism and empiricism, the *transaction* orientation from pragmatism and cognitive theory, and the *transformation* position from humanism, critical theory and postmodernity. And although the transmission and transaction models may inform parts of the program, self-directed learning lies at the centre of all placement courses that claim to prepare autonomously functioning professionals. Sgroi and Ryniker (2002) cite Knowles's description of self-directed learning as "…a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 193). Raschick, Maypole and Day (1998) emphasize the importance of Kolb's learning theory[i] for the matching of students to supervisors. This means that a 'one size fits all' design is not appropriate and there is a need to offer different approaches for different kinds of learners within the same course. Identifying a student's learning style can then enable a workplace supervisor to set tasks or projects that allows the student to become more confident and increase both confidence and the ability to learn from what he or she is doing.

Kolb (1984) identified one of the goals of self-directed learning as 'applying' knowledge and professional values to specific practices, which are competent and ethical within an organization. He notes that learning opportunities often occur randomly in the workplace and that they are more likely to occur in an environment that allows students to seek out particular experiences and become active decision-makers in their own learning. This means that attempts to specify learnings and the order in which they will occur would intrude drastically into the natural spontaneity of the learning endeavor and hence the student's 'ownership' of it.

THE CURRICULUM OUTCOMES OF WORKPLACE EDUCATION

Socialization of Students into the Professional Workforce

Barretti (2004), in his exploration of the history of professional socialization found that students did not perceive any encouragement from the university for them to develop a sense of 'belonging' to the profession; rather, they believed that their preparation focused on 'situational learning' and 'daily coping' rather than on capacity building in order to be incorporated into the work culture. Similarly, Enoch (1989) noted that there is a basic need for the majority of new professionals to feel accepted in the organization in which they work and reinforcement that they are 'doing a good job' or meeting the needs of the organization that promotes this. Work efficacy runs deeper than just knowledge and skills; it involves the sense of belonging to a particular profession and of having adopted successfully the cultural and behavioral norms associated with 'membership'. These include details like the dress codes and the rules and sanctions systems that are often unspoken as well as the assumption

that the individual shares a common set of values, attitudes, skills, esoteric knowledge and jargon often inaccessible to those who are outside the profession.

Professional Identity

Induction into a profession takes time (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000), and a novice professional who is beginning the process can feel surrounded by rule makers, but without a knowledge of the rules to guide even simple interactions. Only when those responsible develop experiences that deliberately assist with the student's social integration into the organization will work placements fill an important role in helping students to begin *identifying* with their profession. Organizations that provide students with tasks that are achievable, as well as genuinely beneficial to the organization, are assisting in developing the efficacy required for a student to acquire a competent professional identity. A number of researchers (e.g., Bisno & Cox, 1997; Bogo, Raphael & Roberts, 1993; Costello, 2004; Gilbert, 1977; McMichael, 2000) argue that professional identity incorporates multiple dimensions, including gender, race, ethnicity, credentials and class. McMichael (2000) believes that some of the confusion surrounding the definition of the concept is related to professions themselves not being able to articulate their own 'self-perception'. Clearly, a person's sense of professional identity comes from a number of sources including: the educational institutions that prepare them, each employing workplace, and subsequent life experiences with colleagues and clients. It is these particular experiences, coupled with a personal sense of commitment that controls the role expectations of self and others, and hence identity.

Costello (2004) observed that students internalized the perceived expectations of others in order to create a sense of professional identity as their studies proceeded. This was manifest often in incidental behaviors, for example, the way they began to adopt a particular conservative dress code. Similarly, role theorists like Biddle (1979) and Goffman (1974) describe the process of developing a social identity as requiring an initial phase of 'role-playing' where the individual 'tries on' the identity (pre-made like a costume) along with an associated set of social expectations. According to them, this is followed by an extended phase of 'role-taking' in which the individual acts out the part and finally the 'role-making' where the person *becomes* the role and sees the expectations as a central part of him or herself. Gaining identity in a chosen profession requires confidence the individual goes through these phases, and is often manifest in the unashamed acknowledgement of what he or she does *not* know. Opportunities for developing autonomy can be identified when students begin to take charge of their own learning when placement commences with an assumption that each student has the ability to decide what they need to know, to see opportunities presented and to choose learning activities that will rectify gaps in their knowledge. Only then can the workplace based curriculum become emancipatory.

Developing Emancipatory Curricula in the Current Legislative Context

The central university funding authority for all 38 universities in Australia has issued an edict that learning and performance in a work placement course needs to be *directed* by the university (Department of Education Science & Training [DEST], 2005). This means that there needs to be:

–   ongoing regular input and contact between university staff and the student;

- oversight and direction exercised by staff over the ongoing learning and performance of the student;
- clearly defined and managed assessment processes controlled by the university;
- clearly defined and managed educational objectives and content controlled by the university; and
- definition and management of the performance levels achieved by students in the course.

These demands focus the developers of work-integrated courses on articulating those *educational* elements of the experiences that will be tied to university funding levels by the Australian Government (DEST, 2005).

A field placement course now must be demonstrably at least as much of an *educational* activity as is sitting in a classroom. But, the nature of workplace based courses and their goals mean that the emphasis is on active rather than passive learning, and that the framework in which the learning experiences are designed allows the motivation of the students to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic. This means that the field practicum needs to have success built into the required activities, and the student needs to have room to move in developing these tasks in consultation with the workplace supervisor and the university. For the student, success and achievement in a real-world task (i.e., the production of something worthwhile for the host organization) is then likely to become an intermediate goal, and the learning experiences will match the student's expressed needs and the needs of the workplace. Workplace based courses that enable the student to reflect upon and analyze quite specific and challenging work experiences in their full social setting, articulate their understandings to others and be able to generalize from them.

CURRENT EXPECTATIONS OF COURSE DESIGNERS IN AUSTRALIA

The inaugural conference of the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) provided an opportunity for the authors to explore the expectations held by the various stakeholders in workplace based courses by a group of academics already providing such programs in the field. These expectations are listed below and then the extents to which they reflect the concepts in the literature review above are discussed. We conclude this paper with a list of changes to existing university practices that need to be instigated if workplace based programs are to meet the expectations of current course conveners, the literature, and delivered according to the requirements of the DEST.

The three authors each have had experience as either the academic convener of a workplace based course, a workplace supervisor or as a student in such a program. Together, we conducted a workshop exercise that asked the participating delegates who came from academic environments to identify what they believed was essential in leading students to become competent professional workers. The group was provided with an information sheet explaining the proposed workshop format, the approved ethical guidelines and the kind of output we anticipated. Each participant was then asked to provide written consent for us to report their responses publicly. Two delegates chose to leave at this stage and the nine remaining were randomly assigned to one of three groups. The discussion in each group was facilitated by one of us and the participants were asked to arrive at a consensus. Each group developed a list of responsibilities they identified as priorities. The groups then came together, shared their lists and collated them into a single document which is discussed below.

The statements of expectation generated by the workshop participants in response to the three questions asked are listed and discussed below:

1. What are the responsibilities of the university in the student becoming competent?
   – Work integrated learning is a three-way partnership between the student, workplace, and educational institution;
   – The education institution should drive the responsibility;
   – Students must be given increasing responsibility as the program proceeds;
   – There is a need for the curriculum to provide specific opportunities for the student to have this responsibility;
   – Different placements have different expectations;
   – Industry and education need to work more closely together;
   – There should be an emphasis on skills and knowledge (attributes of different disciplines experienced in the learning);
   – There are specific strategies for autonomous learning;
   – There must be more reflective learning and students need to think about what else is going on in the workplace;
   – Educational institutions can help students to reflect and help supervising institutions to develop their educational skills;
   – The student needs to establish his/her own learning objectives;
   – There is a range of possible models for placement: blocks, short practicum, one day a week etc.; and
   – The educational institution has the ultimate responsibility for what goes on.

2. What are the responsibilities of the workplace organization in the student becoming competent?

   – The need to provide a relevant and suitable project for the students to focus upon;
   – The need to provide adequate workplace health and safety information and to reinforce safety procedures;
   – That a suitable induction process for introducing students to the specific workplace is provided; and
   – That ultimately, students have the responsibility to learn. Both educators and supervisors can only provide enabling opportunities.

3. What are the responsibilities of the student in becoming competent?

   – The educational institution has the responsibility for socializing them into the profession from day one;
   – The institution will provide guidelines about what is expected from the placement and possibly an induction program for the students;
   – The role of the supervisor is to set tasks, set expectations, provide feedback, act in a mentoring role, and ensure that the student is aware of workplace health and safety issues;
   – The academic supervisor will visit them in the workplace and provide a sense of security and feedback about their progress; and

    − All three stakeholders are important, but it is the student who is responsible for his or her own learning whilst the placement is progressing.

In general, the participants seem to agree with the literature in all of these points. Each course needs to be tailored according to institutional requirements and the resources available, and the university needs to take prime responsibility for ensuring that the course requirements are met and be able to provide evidence that it has done so. The participants did not address the details of either a curriculum statement or its implementation, but agreed that this needs further research.

Coll and Eames (2000) claim that the most effective method of ensuring that students have a positive placement experience is to *match* each student with an appropriate workplace organization before the course commences. This means that program implementers need to have an in-depth knowledge of each organization and an understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and interests of each student in order to make *suitable* placements and vet the tasks appropriately. University and workplace staff should also supervise student assessment collaboratively, negotiating the detailed requirements with each student and ensuring that appropriate personal reflection on the experience has occurred.

In addition to the points raised by the participants concerning the role of the workplace organization, Kadushin (cited in Pepper, 1996) notes that placement organizations and supervisors fulfill administrative, educational and supportive functions for students. They need to provide support to students that helps them work within the agency, to equip students with the basic knowledge and skills to carry out particular tasks and to assist them develop personal attributes such as self-confidence and self-awareness. They need to work with the university in the development of appropriate tasks and be prepared to refuse to make 'unnecessary' decisions on behalf of the students in order to maximize the learning that occurs on placement (Bates, Bates & Bates, 2004). Supervisors serve as role models and provide a template for behaviors expected of a professional worker

CONCLUSION

There are a variety of systems and programs, each of which carries its own traditions. It is clear that discussion of work integrated learning that attempts to systematize what is currently being done is often impeded by unchallenged assumptions and linguistic conventions. It is also clear that changes need to be made in the curriculum statements that purport to describe these programs in university documents.

In summary, we can say that for students to be prepared for the workplace through a placement:

    − The curriculum statement should clearly state what is required of each of the three partners - universities, workplace organizations and students. The courses should be clearly designed with clear details about who has responsibility for organizing, coordinating and assessing students to ensure that the interaction between the three participants functions as smoothly as possible;

    − The curriculum statement should specify the guidance and support available to each student and there must be an active and intentional partnership between the university and the organizational workplace in which the students are placed. Well-organized partnerships allow students to seek the support they need when required

and acknowledge that for many students this is their first experience of work in the career they have chosen;

– The curriculum must provide opportunities for the student to apply what they have already learned and encourage them to become autonomous in their own learning with the goal of achieving basic competence and confidence to make independent decisions by the completion of their placement. These courses must implicitly demand that students engage in deeper learning as they further develop skills and abilities learnt in more theoretical courses, and then confront them with the reality of taking responsibility in the world of work (Bates, 2003); and

– The curriculum should be a deliberately constructed experience which requires statements of its intent to work from practical and transactional goals towards emancipatory and transformational activity.

These requirements can probably best be met by describing clearly the role expectations held for each of the stakeholders by the university providing the course. The curriculum statement should state clearly the nature of the requirements to be met by students and how they are to be assessed. These may be expressed in terms of the extent each student has been able to demonstrate at least the beginnings of professional autonomy and the ability to engage in self-directed learning. The three main stakeholders, with their broadly defined and overlapping roles need to maintain a continual open communication between each other. Students need to become parties in this negotiation so that the program can help develop their autonomy and decrease their dependence on both the organization and the university.

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative education (APJCE) arose from a desire to produce an international forum for discussion of cooperative education issues for practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and is intended to provide a mechanism for the dissemination of research, best practice and innovation in work-integrated learning. The journal maintains close links to the biennial Asia-Pacific regional conferences conducted by the World Association for Cooperative Education. In recognition of international trends in information technology, APJCE is produced solely in electronic form. Published papers are available as PDF files from the website, and manuscript submission, reviewing and publication is electronically based.

Cooperative education in the journal is taken to be work-based learning in which the time spent in the workplace forms an integrated part of an academic program of study. Essentially, cooperative education is a partnership between education and work, in which enhancement of student learning is a key outcome. More specifically, cooperative education can be described as a strategy of applied learning which is a structured program, developed and supervised either by an educational institution in collaboration with an employer or industry grouping, or by an employer or industry grouping in collaboration with an educational institution. An essential feature is that relevant, productive work is conducted as an integral part of a student's regular program, and the final assessment contains a work-based component. Cooperative education programs are commonly highly structured and possess formal (academic and employer) supervision and assessment. The work is productive, in that the student undertakes meaningful work that has economic value or definable benefit to the employer. The work should have clear linkages with, or add to, the knowledge and skill base of the academic program.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The editorial board welcomes contributions from authors with an interest in cooperative education. Manuscripts should comprise reports of relevant research, or essays that discuss innovative programs, reviews of literature, or other matters of interest to researchers or practitioners. Manuscripts should be written in a formal, scholarly manner and avoid the use of sexist or other terminology that reinforces stereotypes. The excessive use of abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided. All manuscripts are reviewed by two members of the editorial board. APJCE is produced in web-only form and published articles are available as PDF files accessible from the website http://www.apjce.org.

Research reports should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry, a description and justification for the methodology employed, a description of the research findings-tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance for practitioners, and a conclusion preferably incorporating suggestions for further research. Essays should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to, and discussion of, relevant literature, and a discussion of the importance of the topic for other researchers and practitioners. The final manuscript for both research reports and essay articles should include an abstract (word limit 300 words), and a list of keywords, one of which should be the national context for the study.

Manuscripts and cover sheets (available from the website) should be forwarded electronically to the Editor-in-Chief directly from the website. In order to ensure integrity of the review process authors' names should not appear on manuscripts. Manuscripts should include pagination, be double-spaced with ample margins in times new-roman 12-point font and follow the style of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association in citations, referencing, tables and figures (see also, http://www.apa.org/journals/faq.html). The intended location of figures and diagrams, provided separately as high-quality files (e.g., JPG, TIFF or PICT), should be indicated in the manuscript. Figure and table captions, listed on a separate page at the end of the document, should be clear and concise and be understood without reference to the text.

NOTES:

[†] This paper is based on a conference paper workshopped at the inaugural Australian Collaborative Education (ACEN) held at the Gold Coast, Australia during 27th – 29th September 2006

[i] Kolb's learning theory can be used as a useful guide: supervisors can identify whether a student learns best through "(a) Concrete Experience, learning through 'experience'; (b) Reflective Observation, learning through 'examining'; (c) Abstract Conceptualisation, learning through 'explaining'; and (d) Active Experimentation, learning through 'applying'" (Kolb, 1984)