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Citation: Shiel, Gillian, Miller, Ann, Rhodes, Garth, Corbett, Sally and Duncan, Katie (2007) Reflection and Learning amongst diverse student groups in the workplace: examining the experience. In: AISHE 2007 Conference, 30-31 August 2007, NUI Maynooth, Ireland.

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**AISHE Conference 30<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> August 2007**  
**Teaching & Learning in the Changing World of Education**

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**Reflection and Learning amongst diverse student groups in the workplace: examining the experience.**

Key words;

*Diverse student groups, critical reflection, changing role of HEIs, enquiry learning, advancement of practice, career development and employment opportunities*

*Abstract*

*Higher education continues to undergo significant changes to meet the challenges of contemporary society. The role of Higher Education Institutions in effectively meeting the knowledge and skill requirements of the individual, the employer and society through effective teaching and learning strategies is under increasing scrutiny.*

*Within the School of Health, Community and Education Studies at Northumbria University, work-based learning approaches are becoming increasingly important as a vehicle to enable individuals to gain academic credit and qualifications through developing their personal and professional repertoire of skills and knowledge, and also as a mechanism to improve organisational practice/change. The School has used Work-Based Learning Programmes to work innovatively in learning partnerships with employers. One such example is a Professional Practice Award Programme developed with a local NHS Trust. Through a process of productive critical reflection, the programme promotes awareness of the workplace as a learning environment and this is utilised to extend the learner's capability and individual effectiveness.*

*Through the presentation of a short case study exploring one cohort of students from the Professional Practice Award programme the authors will share their experiences. A number of key issues have been identified through a process of critical reflection undertaken by the authors. Key themes that have emerged which the authors believe have a wider resonance across the academic community are;*

- *The complexities of using learning and teaching approaches within multi-professional groups who present individual diverse entry behaviour and learning needs*
- *The challenges facing the academic to recognise and assess the diverse learning acquired throughout individual learning journeys so that it can be formally recognised within an HE setting.*
- *Promoting individual development to meet organisational need and policy drivers*
- *Developing students' knowledge and skills for career development in complex professional contexts.*

## *Introduction*

In the twenty first century Higher Education continues to adapt to new challenges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are facing increased financial constraints and new drivers that potentially can have significant influence upon future provision and activity. As a consequence of demographic data identifying a 15% reduction in the number of 18 year olds over the next five years (DFES 2005), many HEIs are refocusing their attention to mature students many of who are already in employment. The workforce from which HEIs will be recruiting learners will include a significant number of individuals who may not have academic qualifications but are rich in experience and professional knowledge. This paper examines negotiated work based learning (NWBL) as a mode of learning that meets the needs of individual learners, HEIs and employers in contemporary society. A case study explores how an effective learning partnership has been developed that supports individual development; addresses organisational need and addresses policy drivers. The learning process is supported by a spiral of critical reflection that enables individual learners to address personal and professional development. The benefits for employing organisations include staff more able to manage change and therefore respond more effectively to emerging policy drivers.

## *Overview of Negotiated Work-based Learning at Northumbria University*

At Northumbria NWBL is increasingly being used as a mode of study for employed people and as a significant agent for change within the workplace. It focuses on learning in and from the workplace, where work provides the focus for the learning programme. Through critical reflection, awareness of the workplace as a learning environment is promoted and this is utilised to extend the learner's capability and individual effectiveness. The approach adopted makes use of partnership agreements with organisations and learning contracts with individuals to negotiate and define learning pathways, which integrate work-based and academic learning.

Sobiechowska & Maisch (2006:270) provide a definition of NWBL that clearly articulates the approach employed and discussed by the authors;

“... where students are full-time employees whose programme of study is embedded in the workplace and is designed to meet the learning needs of the employees and the aims of the organisation.”

The principles of NWBL at Northumbria are based upon the six key characteristics as described by Boud and Solomon (2001):

- (i) A partnership between organisation and university to foster learning
- (ii) Learners are employed / in a contractual relationship with the external organisation
- (iii) The programme followed derives from the needs of the workplace and the learner: work is the curriculum (i.e. the vehicle through which the curriculum is critically explored)
- (iv) Learners engage in a process of recognition of current competencies prior to negotiation of programme of study
- (v) A significant element of the programme is through learning projects undertaken in the workplace
- (vi) The University assesses the learning outcomes against a trans-disciplinary framework of standards and levels

In order to be successful in NWBL certain conditions need to be in place in both HEIs and partner organisations. Passfield (2002) discusses the importance of synergy in achieving individual and organisational goals with the multiplier effect of synergy at organisational level as similar to the collaborative effect at individual level. Passfield (2002:156) suggests synergy occurs when “highly motivated people, engaged in dialogue across subcultures, undertake collaborative activity that provides the opportunity to pursue simultaneously individual and organisational goals.” In making a judgement on the feasibility of embarking upon the development of a NWBL learning partnership it is important to consider as to whether the partnership organisations;

- are receptive, responsive and sufficiently visionary
- are supported by senior management
- have sufficient funding and resources
- understand the underlying pedagogical ethos of NWBL
- have procedures in place to approve/accredit and quality assure flexible learning programmes
- have key practitioners with a sufficiently broad repertoire of expert knowledge and skills of Work-based Learning that incorporate a ‘toolbox’ of WBL learning & teaching competencies, a detailed understanding of relevant institutional policy, politics and procedures, curriculum development, consultancy and project management skills

ne such learning partnership has been developed between Northumbria University and Northumbria Healthcare Trust (NHCT). In the UK the National Health Service (NHS) has over recent years become more determined by targets and the need to respond to new technologies and Government drivers. In order to function responsively NHS Healthcare Trusts have been required to engage in a variety of activities to prepare the workforce to respond effectively to drivers. Plsek (2003) suggests that innovating in complex health organisations is difficult but that staff can become empowered to generate innovation. Work-based learning is a process driven model of learning that can support creative thinking in order to embed change in practice potentially preparing staff to respond, adapt and become pro-active in the change process.

Internal and external factors influence the development and provision of learning opportunities in the NHS (Munroe, 2004). These factors include government strategy, professional requirements for continuous professional development (CPD) and the employer’s requirements for a competent workforce that delivers evidence-based care through the acquisition of the knowledge and skills that meet the employer’s requirements. (Munroe, 2004) Most professional learning is experiential or reflective, occasioned by events and experiences at work. Through planned strategies it is essential that learning is of benefit to both the individual and the organisation (Harding, 2005).

To address current drivers and to develop more integrated ways of working NHCT carried out two studies. The views of staff were explored using in-depth interviews conducted with a ward-based team, and a Trust wide survey provided both quantitative data and qualitative data from open text responses. Three quarters of the 1100 survey respondents said they had undertaken multidisciplinary training within the previous year, but only 60 claimed that it was quality assured with only 15 staff recalling the name of the accrediting institution. Findings suggest staff wanted;

- a variety of approaches to learning

- learning to be interactive and inter-professional in which personal perspectives could be shared and valued equally by all professions.
- to be able to learn at their own pace and at a level appropriate for levels of prior educational attainment, seniority and experience.
- to see changes in practice as a result of the educational process.

In a concurrent scoping exercise a number of 'in-house' programmes were identified, but few were accredited and there was no coherent approach to accumulation of academic credits as part of ongoing continuing professional development. Credit accumulation was identified as an important motivation for staff in NHCT's employ e.g. health care professionals, administrators and management.

As a result of this activity Northumbria collaborated with NHCT to develop and introduce flexible work based education through a work-based project module which was piloted in acute care teams and across agencies, including the local Primary Care Trust and a social care agency. Evaluation of the pilot showed evidence of benefits in the area of professional practice with improved patient care, better communication between disciplines and agencies and significant changes in service delivery, and improved motivation. In relation to personal learning the learners stated their satisfaction with the accessibility of learning opportunities and there were significant learning achievements at a variety of academic levels. The pilot was a runner up in the Strategic Health Authority innovations award in 2005 and subsequently won the Community Hospitals Innovation Award in 2006.

Following ongoing evaluation within an action learning paradigm the Professional Practice (PPA) programme has been introduced to offer a 60 credit award at all undergraduate levels. At postgraduate level, modules are available to allow progression to a Masters Degree

*The University Award is offered as:*

<i>Statement of Achievement</i>	<i>Level 3</i>
<i>University Certificate</i>	<i>Level 4</i>
<i>University Diploma</i>	<i>Level 5</i>
<i>Advanced Diploma</i>	<i>Level 6</i>
<i>Graduate Certificate</i>	<i>Level 6</i>
<i>Postgraduate Certificate</i>	<i>Level 7</i>
<i>Postgraduate Diploma</i>	<i>Level 7</i>
<i>Masters Degree</i>	<i>Level 7</i>

The PPA Programme is characterised by a number of key features:

- A negotiated learning contract between the learner, the University and the partner organisation based upon individual and organisational need;
- Recognition of prior learning & continuing professional development
- Independent work-based study & work-based projects directly related to and benefiting the learner's role within the workplace and team functioning;
- The level of learning for the individual is determined by the demand of the learning, the degree of autonomy of the learner, the context in which the learning is applied and previous level of study.
- Individuals are supported by a University tutor and a Workplace Advisor who is prepared and supported by the University.
- The programme is delivered on partner organisation premises

The PPA was offered to all NHCT employees regardless of profession, role or academic history. A total of 74 learners were recruited. Working with NHCT provided an opportunity to develop and combine academic and WBL frameworks to provide an innovative approach to personal and professional development. Prior to implementing the PPA, the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF) (Dept. of Health, 2004) was introduced in NHCT. The KSF defines the knowledge and skills that individuals need to apply to their work in order to carry out their role effectively. The framework provides a single consistent, comprehensive tool on which to base review and development for staff. This proved to be influential when profiling individuals to establish entry level and learning pathway. Current academic and professional levels were combined and students linked the programme into their staff appraisal and the need to develop specific KSF dimensions.

Two evaluations of the 95 students in the pilot and first iteration of the full programme (Duncan et al, 2005; Redhead et al, 2007) indicate that the programme offers considerable advantages:

- Learning that has direct relevance to the work role and to organisational need
- Improvements in patient care, working lives, inter-professional working, knowledge of and adherence to Department of Health and Trust policies, use of resources.
- A common accreditation process which can be applied consistently across the workforce
- Recognition of current in-house CPD & Practice Development
- Reduced time away from the workplace for learning
- Work-based learning was deemed more accessible and had the potential to have more impact on patient care and teamwork than classroom learning
- Work-based learning addressed issues of equality of opportunity to learning activities

The nature of NWBL at Northumbria moves the focus of responsibility firmly into the hands of the learner. The process provides an opportunity to interpret, analyse and challenge current thinking and practice in order to develop new personal knowledge, understanding and attitudes and thereby improve their own professional practice. To be successful, individual learners need to develop as highly motivated active learners, to be able to work autonomously, to take responsibility for identifying their learning needs and aspirations and for managing the learning process. Normally, in order to do this they also need to draw upon, use and develop significant prior work experience and professional knowledge. They need to develop and utilise appropriate learning & enquiry methods along with project management skills.

Learning and teaching within multi professional groups who present individually diverse entry behaviour and learning needs is a complex process. Facilitating individual learning in such complex learning environments where groups often consist of learners from different professional groups studying at a variety of academic levels presents significant challenges. Ward and McCormack (2000) suggest that through the implementation of strategies that stimulate challenge, open debate and a supportive learning environment a positive learning culture can be developed. In this learning partnership both partners are aware of their defined roles with Northumbria providing academic guidance e.g. teaching and facilitation of learning process and NHCT providing specific resources to respond to articulated need e.g. I.T. support

An individual learning process is managed through the creative use of learning contracts. At the onset of the programme individual learners undertake a profiling exercise that is used to develop a negotiated learning contract that supports the formation of an individual programme providing a framework for the learner. The learning contract carries academic credit and achievement of the credit is dependant upon individual learners being able to;

- describe, rationalise and contextualise previous learning achievements
- identifying learning objectives for the programme
- devising a programme of learning that will enable achievement of the objectives

A clear specification is provided, which provides learners with generic detail concerning the programme's overarching aims, learning outcomes, learning & teaching strategy and assessment. Individual need is addressed through the development of specific aims & objectives, learning outcomes, which are negotiated by the learner with their employer and university tutor to form the basis of a learning contract.

A timetable is developed to meet the specific cultural and professional requirements of the partner organisation with regard to working practices. Delivery of the programme takes place on partner organisation premises usually on a half day once per month. The final hour of each timetabled session is devoted to tutorial support. This delivery pattern provides learners with access to sessions in their workplace at a suitable time that should not conflict with working practice. Learners attend only those sessions that are relevant to their individual pathway but access tutorial support as and when required.

Learning in and through the workplace is not easy. Learners need to be able to manage and take forward their learning alongside and often integral to their daily work activities within an environment that is often hectic and unpredictable. In his report to the Department of Health and the NHS Fryer (2006) recommends the integration of learning and service delivery to ensure learning is embedded in the management of change. The learning partnership between Northumbria and NHCT has ensured that a learning environment is in place that supports enquiring approach to action learning. Although Pedler (1997:xxii-xxiii) takes the view that action learning occurs in learning sets consisting of around six learners the authors of this paper would argue that in NWBL individual learners participate in a variety of groups that support the action learning process. However Pedler (ibid) does offer a definition of action learning that echoes the philosophy of the approach examined in this paper. "Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organisations which take the task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober or deliberate action without learning."

In such an environment it is important to provide an adaptable structure for learners so that they can maintain a focus for their learning and development. Boud (2006:20) suggests that; "productive reflection connects work and learning and operates in the space between the two." It is the learning that occurs in this connecting space that is the most powerful.

Throughout the programme learners are required to investigate and integrate the relationship between academic theory and workplace practice. To facilitate this learning process learners are supported to critically reflect upon past and current 'prevailing social, political, cultural, or professional ways of acting' (Brookfield, 1995)

by drawing upon appropriate models and approaches to critical thinking and reflection such as suggested by Gibbs (1988), Kemmis (1985) and Schön (1987).

A spiral of critical reflection is employed throughout the programme. The process of reflection begins at the commencement of the programme when individual learners engage in the development of their learning contract. Through the use of projects learners are supported in developing professional and personal knowledge where the expectation is that learners not only develop knowledge relating to their professional context but also to develop those skills of lifelong learning that will support them beyond the duration of the programme. Reflecting upon individual learning is embedded in both formative and summative assessment.

Onyx (2001) suggests that, whilst critical reflection is an accepted and fundamental concept within Higher Education there is a difficulty in getting employers to accept this approach. However it has been the authors' experience that, as the demand for a knowledge economy grows, employers with whom they work are placing a high priority on reflection as a learning mechanism to enable their staff to become more effective and productive. Learners are supported through the learning and reflection process by tutors through structured formative assessment and feedback and by workplace advisers who have been prepared and supported by university tutors

The approach of Northumbria's PPA is akin to a small-scale investigation & development model which draws upon action research methodology. Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) define action research as

*“a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view. It seeks to reconnect action and reflection, theory and practice in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. More generally it grows out of a concern for the flourishing of individual persons and their communities”*

Building upon Raelin (2000), Gray (2001:316) acknowledges the value of action research within a WBL programme but suggests that in WBL the process goes beyond Reason & Bradbury's (2001) definition. He defines WBL as:

*“arising from action and problem solving within a working environment, and thus is centred on live projects and challenges to individuals and organisations... using research methodologies as part of WBL can significantly improve the problem-solving capacities of employees as well as increasing their academic skills.”*

Rhodes and Shiel (2007) identify that whilst there is a close correlation between stages of NWBL and that of the action research process as alluded to in the definitions above, there are some fundamental differences:

- The position of the learner in the process - in action research the problem is central, whereas in NWBL the aim is practitioner development where the learner is central to the process
- The work-based process is organic and evolves in response to individual need and contextual change



- In NWBL the connection between action, reflection, theory and practice already exists, the project formalises the process.

Northumbria's approach to NWBL uses a research and development methodology, where the research/enquiry stage is only one element that is integrated throughout the process. Utilising this approach enables the learner to gather the appropriate knowledge & evidence and to develop skills necessary to:

- diagnose problems and identify opportunities;
- engage in enquiry
- analyse;
- plan and implement a project
- effectively present and evaluate project outcomes.

Skills of enquiry, reflection and evaluation are essential in any NWBL programme. Regardless of size or level the learners are required to engage in a learning process that involves the engagement with practice, theory and context. In order to effectively learn from the NWBL process learners must acquire or enhance their skills in order to make sense of the reality of their practice environment and incorporate new learning. Through making sense of individual experiences learning can become personally meaningful and leading to changes in future behaviour (Knapper & Croppley 1999). The outcome for the successful learner is a significant development of personal, propositional and professional knowledge (Taylor 1997).

Eraut et al (2004) suggest that engaging in challenging work based tasks result in learning in and from the workplace and increases motivation and confidence. Academic tutors need to ensure that the appropriate balance between challenge, support and confidence is maintained.

A qualitative evaluation of the original pilot programme undertaken by Duncan (2005) identified a number of key issues concerning the programme relevant to this paper. Whilst most learners identified they found difficulty in defining their expectations at the onset as both inter-professional and the NWBL methodologies were new concepts to them, generally they were extremely receptive to the problem-based participatory model adopted. The opportunity to focus on professional interests within their own practice engendered a sense of ownership and empowerment. Most participants involved in the programme stated that they really enjoyed the experience, felt it worked well being a style of learning and development they would wish to adopt and recommend to others. A particular strength of the programme was learners gained a great deal in learning with and from one another and benefited from receiving support from their co-learners resulting in improved collaboration and understanding of others' roles within hospital and community settings. The role of the work-based adviser proved to be crucial. Learners relied heavily on their guidance, resulting in a greater commitment from them than was originally anticipated. A significant identified outcome was that learners identified increased confidence, job satisfaction and sense of achievement.

Identified barriers to the programme were largely anticipated and centred upon:

- Learners prior knowledge and experience of higher education
- Time commitment to the programme within a very busy working life. Learners recommended the introduction of protective time for their engagement in the programme

- IT literacy and proficiency and access to computers. Learners recommended that those enrolling in the programme need to be either computer literate or undertake basic IT training to facilitate their learning

One unexpected concern voiced by learners centred on how the inter-professional learning methodology could be sustained once the formal academic structures and workplace support were removed. In terms of the programme this voiced concern reinforced the positive outcome of achieving success with inter-professional learning but posed a challenge to NHCT.

Academic tutors working in NWBL programmes are operating outside of their organisation's environment often in unfamiliar surroundings without immediate access to university support systems. In order to be effective the toolkit of pedagogical attributes held by the academic tutor should include the:

- Ability to respond appropriately and creatively to unique situations
- Ability to interpret and work across academic levels and professional boundaries
- Ability to quickly gain knowledge of the workplace
- Ability to assist learners to identify individual entry behaviour and learning need and to advise learners on the appropriate level of study in relation to current professional and academic attainment.
- Ability to lead seminars, workshops, group tutorials and prepare learning materials in a manner suited to diverse audiences and to cater for each academic level.
- Knowledge of organisational change
- Knowledge and skill in the area of learning and teaching including:
  - Learning Needs analysis (including use of occupational/organisational standards)
  - Negotiating individual learning plans and pathways and level of study
  - Learner support and guidance (face2face, on-line, individual, group)
  - Assessment for Learning (including constructive alignment of formative assessment)
  - Study skill development
  - Motivating learning

### *Conclusion*

The demand for NWBL at Northumbria has expanded dramatically over the past two years growing from small-scale projects to substantial activity (circa 350 students) and continues to grow. In response undergraduate degree and doctorate provision are under development. Early research and evaluation of NWBL activity at Northumbria suggests that the process meets the needs of learners and employing organisations providing a valuable learning opportunity to embed learning and knowledge development in individual and organisational practice. As activity has expanded evaluation and research has echoed the NWBL process whereby following the action paradigm understanding and implementation of NWBL has grown organically informed by process and the experiences of learners and partner organisations alike.

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