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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSGU UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

How Experiential Learning can be Utilised to Complement Academic Studies

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5 Teaching Development Cycle 3: Paper

This section presents my reflections (in the form of a paper for the journal Active Learning in Higher Education) on how experiential learning can be utilised to complement academic studies, among both full-time and distance-learning postgraduate cohorts in Archives and Records Management. Although this forms the report of the third teaching development cycle, in many ways it is a summation of my experience thus far, with examples drawn from my recent practice.

5.1 Introduction

The programmes of study with which I am centrally concerned – notably the postgraduate courses in Archive Administration and Records Management, full-time and distance-learning, are essentially vocational in nature. By completing these courses students equip themselves with the postgraduate qualification (accredited by the UK Society of Archivists) necessary to enable them to take up employment as professional archivists and record managers.

Experiential learning is integral to these courses; full-time students are required to undertake a period of work-based learning prior to commencing the course, and distance-learning students must be employed within the vocational environment.

The challenge is to make links within academic teaching and learning practices to the experience of the students. Over the course of the teaching development cycles evidenced by this portfolio I have utilised and developed a number of different approaches to doing this. The following paper presents a summation of these approaches, as utilised in my third teaching cycle, and my personal reflection on their use and effectiveness.
Making the most of experience

The place of experiential learning in archives and records management education

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ABSTRACT Discussion focuses on the relevance of experiential learning processes in promoting learning within full-time and distance-learning cohorts of postgraduate archives and records management students. General theories on experiential learning are considered in the context of vocational training, as well as the role of conventional academic studies. It is argued that experiential learning has a uniquely valuable role to play in allowing students to contextualise and operationalise subject knowledge.

KEYWORDS: distance learning, experiential learning, vocational training

Introduction

Courses which provide professional vocational training within academic contexts require different approaches from those adopted for traditional academic subjects. The explicit connection with the professional or vocational sphere requires that curricula take account of the knowledge and skill sets required within the workplace, and that theoretical learning is related effectively to practical contexts.

Archives and records management is one such professional/vocational area where the experience of students forms a critical element of the learning process. Many early entrants into this profession obtained their ‘training’ within a work-based environment, through informal or formal ‘apprenticeships’ such as that offered by the Bodleian Library at Oxford from 1947 to 1980. The first academic courses emerged in 1947, at University College, London and the University of Liverpool, shortly followed by the now defunct University of Wales, Bangor course (established in 1954), and that of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1956. The focus of such courses was, initially at least, firmly oriented on the meaning and interpretation of documents. Today the curriculum has widened almost beyond recognition, and is presenting archival educators in the UK with difficult choices. Ellis and Greening (2002: 198) consider that postgraduate programmes are:
in a difficult and sometimes uncomfortable position – between the proverbial rock and a hard place – seeking to produce students with an increasing range of skills to match the requirements regularly stipulated by employers in job advertisements and specifications, while needing to satisfy the university that we do not place an unreasonable burden on our students and that their workload is not disproportionate when compared with other Master’s programmes.

One way of addressing this increasing curriculum ‘burden’ is to seek ways to enhance learning of key ‘transferable’ skills within existing course parameters; another strategy is to utilise student experience to reduce the burden of teaching and learning in basic practical skills.

In the following sections, specific consideration will be given to the value of experiential learning in both these contexts; the former by providing opportunities for learning through experience, the latter by using existing experience to reinforce conventional teaching.

**Turning ‘experience’ into ‘experiential learning’**

The experience of the student has particular relevance within the area of professional/vocational education and training. Not least because employers are looking for graduates of these programmes to come equipped with the practical skills required of new entrants into a profession.

However, it must be recognised that not every experience is in itself necessarily a learning experience. Kolb’s *learning cycle* (1984) suggests that in order to learn effectively from experience, ‘doing’, must be followed by ‘reflection’ and lead to ‘theorising’ and hence ‘planning’ to change some aspect of the original action in the future. Beaty (2001: 136) reinforces this point when she notes that:

> experience is not, on its own, enough to support learning. Rather, deliberate and conscious reflection is a requirement for effective experiential learning.

This involves making the unconscious ‘conscious’; making implicit, everyday experiences, explicit learning acts. In effect, bringing experience into a pseudo-academic environment where learning is prescribed and intentional.

Beaty (2001) identifies two basic ways of utilising experiential learning in academic programmes: through pre-planned practical work within the university environment; and through external work-placements. In both cases the practical experiential aspect needs to be linked to theoretical understanding. This is the key to successful experiential learning, and is an integral principle in the development of the approaches adopted in the context of Archives and Records Management education at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.
Experiential learning in Archives and Records Management education

Educators in Archives and Records Management have always recognised the role of experience within their education programmes. Indeed, early provision focused almost exclusively on practical training, utilising strong workplace links to provide students with the experience of ‘doing’ archival work. Although this approach would be supplemented by an element of conventional academic study – introducing some theoretical knowledge – the emphasis was on the ‘how to’, rather than on the ‘why’. Furthermore, links with a single experiential context would tend to privilege one aspect of the ‘how’, rather than developing students knowledge of the range of professional practice.

Recent years have seen a shift from what was essentially a ‘training’ approach, situated within the workplace environment, to an ‘educational’ one, situated within academic institutions. Vaisey (2001: 232), speaking in his position as the President of the Society of Archivists, sees this as reflecting the recognition that:

no longer could a training, however good, from which one emerged with much practical experience but with no qualification, survive the movement begun in the 1970s for a profession and a society with membership based on qualification.

The links between the profession and education have however remained strong, and recognition of the importance of the role of experience is explicitly recognised by all the Archives and Records Management courses through the requirement for students to build up a body of pre-course work-experience. Indeed the Forum for Archives and Records Management Education and Research (FARMER), a group constituted from among the education programmes, has set specific Guidance to applicants seeking, and organisations providing, pre-course work experience in Archives and Records Management. Fig. 1 over the page, reproduces from this the guidance on experiential requirements, in terms of knowledge, experience, and general transferable skills.

Utilising ‘experiential learning’ with full-time students

The challenge within the teaching context is how to utilise this prior experience to best effect. The approach developed at Aberystwyth recognises that by drawing on student’s individual experience, the experiential learning of the group can be reinforced and formalised. As Rowntree (1990: 12) notes:

Apart from tutors, mentors and materials, learners can learn a great deal from one another. This will be especially the case in professional training . . .
Requirements

Knowledge

On application to postgraduate programmes candidates should ensure that they understand and can discuss the following:

- The importance and purpose of records management and archives management to society and individuals
- Similarities and differences in sister disciplines: information management, library management, museum and heritage management.
- Current profile of record keeping within the public, higher education, commercial and specialist sectors.
- Main functions of and processes and techniques involved in records/archives management
- Relationship of organisations with their users and other stakeholders
- Knowledge of key archives/records management organisations and associations
- Awareness of the broad legislative and standards environments
- Awareness of types of available employment in the domain
- Awareness of current professional issues and drivers

Experience

All courses require applicants to have some pre-course record keeping experience in an appropriate environment. Many applicants will have up to a year's such experience; however it is less the length of experience than its quality, and the use the student makes of it which is important. FARMER does not wish to be prescriptive about the time spent on pre-course placements. However the following experience is required:

- Induction to the parent organisation and archives/records service
- Of observing how the service fulfils its mission on an annual and daily basis
- Of organisational/service functions (e.g. acquisition, preservation, access) and activities (e.g. filing, surveying, storage, retrieval, description)
- Of interaction with client groups (external users, internal colleagues etc)
- Of how the organisation publicises its services
- Attendance at staff and user/client meetings
- Attendance at professional society meetings

General transferable skills

Candidates for courses are unlikely to be accepted without the following attributes. The placement provider might therefore like to consider the potential of candidates for their own posts in the following areas:

- A degree usually at 2:1 level or above
- Basic computing skills (word processing, e-mail, spreadsheets, internet use)
- Ability to link and integrate theory, practice and work experience
- Reflect critically on his/her own learning and experience
- Communicate in a clear, systematic and concise way both orally and in writing
- Structure an argument and write coherent prose
- Interact effectively with colleagues, users and other stakeholders
- Work in groups or teams as team member or leader
- Undertake and complete a project within a given time scale
Teaching and learning strategies developed for modules addressing professional best practice, have replaced series of conventional ‘lectures’ with self-instructional open-learning materials, which students can use to reinforce and fine-tune their own experiential knowledge. Teaching sessions then focus on drawing out the experience of students from their pre-course work placement; making this experience explicit in the context of the learning materials, and thereby allowing students to formalise their individual experiential learning, and to benefit from the experience of others.

This approach allows students to reflect on and develop an understanding of the ‘universality’ of theoretical best practice, but within the context of practical differences at the level of archive service provision.

This is ‘one side’ of the experiential ‘coin’; utilising student’s existing work-based learning within the academic environment. The other approach adopted seeks to build experiential learning into the course itself. This is done primarily through practical exercises and assessment which build both professional and transferable skills, and takes place alongside more conventional approaches, such as the traditional ‘academic essay’. Types of exercise and assessment used, and the experiential learning they engender, include:

- Professional reports and briefing documents addressed to non-professional management teams – this enables students to develop their skills in writing professionally for a management audience.

- Promotional leaflets and exhibitions promoting the use of archives to the general public and novice researcher – students develop skills in selecting and presenting material to the public.

- Presentations tailored to the needs of different audiences (management, the public, and different research groups) – this develops presentation skills and teaches students the importance of taking into account the views and needs of particular constituencies.

- Group cataloguing project work – this builds practical cataloguing skills but within a teamwork context, students learn from each other’s skills, and from the experience of working as part of a self-directed team.

These are the types of activity that students will have to undertake within their future employment context; utilising them during teaching and in summative assessment provides an effective means of developing experiential skills alongside subject knowledge.
Utilising 'experiential learning' within a distance-learning context

In recent years, the University of Wales, Aberystwyth has extended its Archives and Records Management educational programmes to encompass distance-learning provision.

There was already a strong tradition of this type of provision through the Society of Archivist’s professional Diploma (now ceased), with the expectation that this would act as a form of in-service training. As with the full-time course the necessity to ensure that students are equipped with the knowledge, practical skills and experience to take their place within the employment market is paramount. Full-time students build their work-experience before undertaking their formal studies, and develop their knowledge and skills further during the course itself, before moving directly into employment. For distance-learning students it is necessary that the professional context is maintained throughout their studies (which may take up to five years), so that their practical experience remains professionally viable.

Experiential learning in this context becomes much more explicit – students are constantly within the work environment, and the juxtaposition with the self-instructional open-learning materials provided by the course, serves to formalise experience into learning. Students also have the unparalleled opportunity to learn from professional colleagues, through both day-to-day work and mentoring relationships.

Although most learning necessarily takes place at a distance, residential study schools are held at Aberystwyth; these serve the important function of allowing students to meet staff and each other, easing the sense of ‘isolation’ that they can otherwise feel. They also provide the opportunity to reinforce the connections between learning from the course and from students’ own experience. During the schools students attend sessions aimed at developing generic skills in writing and presentation, as well as professional subject knowledge; in the latter context every opportunity is taken to connect module materials to the students work-place experience. The materials themselves also incorporate a wide range of reflective exercises, intended to make the same linkages, and promote experiential learning.

One particularly successful innovation has been the inclusion at study school of a tutor-moderated discussion session on current professional issues. The student cohort are asked to identify the issues of most concern within their workplace, and during the discussion are able to relate this to the experience of others within the group. As a tutor, this also provides the opportunity to reinforce key points from the learning materials.

As with the full-time course, different assessment formats and practical exercises enable students to develop, ‘by doing’, transferable skills applicable to their work-place environment.
Conclusion

The experience of delivering professional/vocational courses in Archives and Records Management at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth highlights the value and importance of the role of experiential learning. Students benefit enormously from such approaches, which make explicit the connection between academic theory, and practical application.

Prior experience can be used to reinforce present learning, and present experience to develop the skills and understanding required within the professional environment. Beaty (2001: 146) summarises the potential and value of such approaches as follows:

The challenge for modern higher education is not simply to train the next generation of academics, it is rather to tie learning from experience inextricably to academic study and vice versa in a strong lifelong process of learning which develops the person and society.

The approaches developed at Aberystwyth are enhancing student knowledge, but also providing them with the basis for operationalising that knowledge within the workplace. If students can be equipped through such studies with a sense of themselves as actively learning from their experience and environment, then this will foster a strong professional culture of learning, which can only benefit both the student, and the Archives and Records Management profession of which they form a part.

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