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Groupwork in Practice: a work-based learning approach

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Introduction and objectives

Groupwork in Practice is a 15-credit module designed by Dr Anita Walsh for the Management Foundation degree (Fd) at Birkbeck College, University of London, the pilot of which took place in 2007-08. This case study will show how students who are used to subject-based patterns of study can benefit from work-related learning classes that are delivered and/or facilitated by specialist work-based learning (WBL) practitioners. It also discusses the risk negotiated by students who are being introduced to WBL. Initially students might be apprehensive about the level of support they receive, walking a tightrope between autonomous learning or feeling somewhat adrift if given too much independence.

Birkbeck specialises in part-time education for adults, most of whom are already situated in the workplace, with the majority of classes held in the evening. Birkbeck's approach to WBL emphasises the role that direct experience has to learning (Walsh, 2008) and offers a generic model of WBL from which non-discipline-specific theory and practice can be developed.

Module delivery/facilitation

The group dynamics focus for the module includes group interaction such as conducting meetings, creating collaborative artefacts and delivering a group presentation. This differs from more content-focused management modules and requires research into group dynamics. The dual sensation of working within groups and learning about group work is at the centre of the module's approach; the ability to understand learning as a separate element from work is one of the skills being developed for the workplace. In the case of the Management Foundation Degree students, many aspire to learning that promotes career progression yet prior to the course have not considered group dynamics and theoretical knowledge in the context of their jobs and work practice. A limited amount of content is introduced to encourage critical curiosity; for example, team identities.

At the beginning of the module the individuals are divided into groups selected by the students. The students might perceive a risk regarding group membership (Colbeck *et al.*, 2000), and during

the pilot the choice of groups in the first session created tension because 'friends' were not present. The class the following year chose to follow the suggestion that they count off by fours for random placement. As the modules progress, some students recount the class episodes that involve negotiated group interaction as memorable immersive experiences.

Assessment

Module assessment is through group presentations, minutes of meetings and Learning Reviews based on Learning Logs (similar to a diary). Marks for the minutes and presentations are awarded for both the individual and the group and then combined in order to give an incentive to work for the benefit of the group. The specific format for the Learning Log is not given, yet it is meant to provide a written record of the students' reflective experience throughout the course to provide 'evidence' for analysis in the Learning Review. The students have a Personal Development Planning module in their first year of study, so some aspects of the Learning Review are familiar, but in this module personal reflection needs to theorise as well as describe learning events. Learning Logs directly relate experiences to deepen understanding, further engagement and develop insight. The students often discuss workplace experiences and write about the similarities and differences from class-based experiences.

Model rationale

Groupwork in Practice focuses on experiential learning as an important part of WBL because it means 'doing' is as important as 'knowing' (Kolb, 1984). It is a part of the process that students use content from their management modules and their own workplaces. Students situate theory in their everyday experience, and this learning becomes a part of their professional development in the workplace (Eraut, 2004). The module puts students in the position of evaluating their own performance, using their experience and new knowledge. This creates a bridge between classroom theory and their work-based experiences, utilising theory to be reflected back into the workplace.

Student experience

For students, the class presents a challenge in its difference from more typical discipline-focused modules. Our purpose is to facilitate a supported framework, allowing students to see themselves in new roles, trying out new capabilities, comparing experiences and combining the various elements of taught knowledge and experiential knowledge to engage in an 'emancipatory' experience (Costley, 2000). Within the class some students still seem reluctant at times to ask for help, although they are supported by telephone, email and the University's virtual learning environment. Tutors do not give feedback on scripts that are to be assessed but encourage general

discussion about the assignments. It is a critical expectation that the new module experiences will enhance understanding and reflection in the workplace.

Institutional implications and expansion

Feedback from the original pilot course indicates some elements of success:

- *I like this class because it has given me an insight about group dynamics ... Even though I work in a group at work I have learnt more through this class on how groups should be effective when they are formed.*
- *[I] liked the fact that we were in self-managed groups.*
- *I could meet and get to know the others in my class more. We could [put] the theories into practice and see how they work in reality.*

Groupwork in Practice employs a framework that Birkbeck is now expanding to other Fd programmes. This has been facilitated by a series of Foundation Degree Network workshops with non-WBL staff that shows how experiential learning can enhance their subject area. As the University is planning more Fds, prompted by the introduction of the Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) policy, the implications are that this WBL model will be expanded into other Fd courses.

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Nick had previously been Director for Foundation Degrees at the University of Essex and lectured in business, entrepreneurship and co-ordinated professional studies courses.

Over the past fifteen years he has taught across a broad range of business subjects, particularly marketing, strategy and human resource management at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This lecturing has taken him to institutes in Israel, Hungary and Mexico.