Extending and Embedding Work Based Learning across the University: Change Strategies in Action

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Abstract

This article will discuss some of the educational development strategies used to implement a university-wide project to extend and embed work based learning across all the schools. It will consider the change and engagement strategies that were used and give a flavour of the range of activities that were undertaken to integrate different modes of work based learning across the university. Based on a model of a hub which formed the core of the CEWBL, reaching as spokes into each school, promoted by individual WBL champions, different change approaches will be considered in relation to how WBL pedagogies were adopted in different subject disciplines. Factors which facilitated or hindered the embedding of WBL into schools will be considered in relation to the implications for future higher educational development projects.

Introduction

The purpose of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) initiative was to reward current excellent practice and to invest further in that practice to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community (HEFCE 2005). Institutions were able to define the areas of excellence themselves by demonstrating proof of good teaching and learning through external recognition, quality ratings and previous awards and articulating a viable strategy to disseminate these wider. As the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, now REF) attracts considerable finance and kudos for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) for research activity, the CETL initiative arose as a counterbalance to the RAE as an alternative funding source rewarding excellent teaching, thereby providing an incentive to invest in teaching and learning within HE and encouraging innovation by promoting CETL's as beacons of excellence to raise educational standards across the sector (Gosling & Hannan 2007).

Middlesex University were awarded two CETL's, one of which was in Work Based Learning (WBL), which had a significant track record of excellence and achievement. This included a Queens Anniversary Award in 1995 for 'Excellence and Innovation' in pioneering work based learning, and recognition by the QAA (2003)for being innovative and academically rigorous in WBL (www.qaa.ac.uk) and drew on the activity of the then National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP), located at the time in the School of Lifelong Learning together with the Work Based Learning and Accreditation Unit within the School of Health and Social Sciences. The creation of a Centre for Excellence in Work Based Learning (CEWBL) included both departments and aimed to extend its influence across the university as well as externally to other CETLs and HEIs. The prevalent type of WBL within every school included vocational training, sandwich and work placements within different subject areas, rather than the distinctive type of WBL as promoted by the CEWBL, which identifies WBL as being a 'field of study' (Portwood 2000) rather than a 'mode of study' and was not previously well known or practiced within every school in 2005. The flexibility and responsive nature of the WBL curriculum for organisational learning was also not widely understood. Correspondingly WBL as represented in the CEWBL, did not include vocational,

sandwich and work placements as WBL students are usually mid career, full time workers and part time students, and so do not reflect the traditional 18 to 22 year olds commonly associated with University undergraduate programmes.

Work Based Learning at Middlesex

To summarise, the distinctive WBL curriculum includes four key components which includes accreditation of prior learning, (also known as APEL[1]), which may be experiential, certificated or accredited from employer or professional programmes. An individually negotiated programme with its own title can be devised, in which the learner composes a learning agreement and gains a third party signatory, such as an employer, to demonstrate support for further learning in the workplace. Additionally research and development methods are studied to prepare the learner to undertake a work based project, which develop knowledge and skills around work as well as adding credits towards a university award. Work Based projects can be undertaken as individual projects or as a capstone to a WBL programme. Any one of these curriculum components can be used individually within other programmes as well as across all academic levels from 4-7 FHEQF, with the principles translated to doctoral level study too. The pedagogical approaches which support the curriculum include reflective practice, self directed learning, negotiated content and assessment through learning contracts and any of these can be used as an adjunct to a more traditional programme of study. This offers versatility in programme design and allows a rapid response to creating university awards without repeated validations as the principles and processes within the learning agreement caters for individual and organisational learning needs.

**The aims and objectives of the CEWBL**

The aims and objectives of the CEWBL were to maximize the impact of excellent practice in WBL across the University and provide a catalyst for dissemination of good practice in partnership with other CETLs and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Internally the CEWBL worked to extend and embed WBL teaching, learning and assessment activities across all schools of the university and to enhance the expertise of University staff in recognizing, facilitating and assessing transdisciplinary knowledge generated through experiential learning (APEL) and work based projects. The CEWBL also provided the opportunity to share WBL research focused upon teaching and learning to an external audience in a field where, at the time of the award, there was limited exploration and publication. To employers it offered the development of knowledge creating partnerships between the University and external partners, thus facilitating organisational development (NCWBLP 2004). Currently the WBL position within the university aligns with the corporate plan which recognizes that there is likely to be an increase in future demand for WBL provision (Corporate plan 2008-13, p21, http://www.mdx.ac.uk/aboutus/strategy/docs/Corporate_Plan2008.pdf). Since the CEWBL award, a further £8M HEFCE employer engagement project has been awarded to the Institute of WBL (IWBL) in February 2009, to facilitate a pan university focus towards employers and organisational development which builds on the CEWBL activities.

The model for change

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[1] Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning

The model that was designed to achieve the CEWBL objectives was that of a 'hub and spoke' with the CEWBL as the hub, from which 'spokes' reached into each school through the appointment of part time CEWBL coordinators who were to disseminate WBL. Financial, collegial and expert support was provided by the CEWBL by working with the coordinators individually and collectively to spread practice into schools working on a 'diffusion' and 'empirical-rational' (Land 2001) approach by enthusing others to try similar activities (Land 2001) and providing rational evidence of success. The CEWBL also worked with colleagues within WBL to develop practice and resources. The figure below illustrates the positioning of the CEWBL and the flow of information, activities and ideas between the schools and WBL.

Figure 1. CEWBL Hub and Spoke model
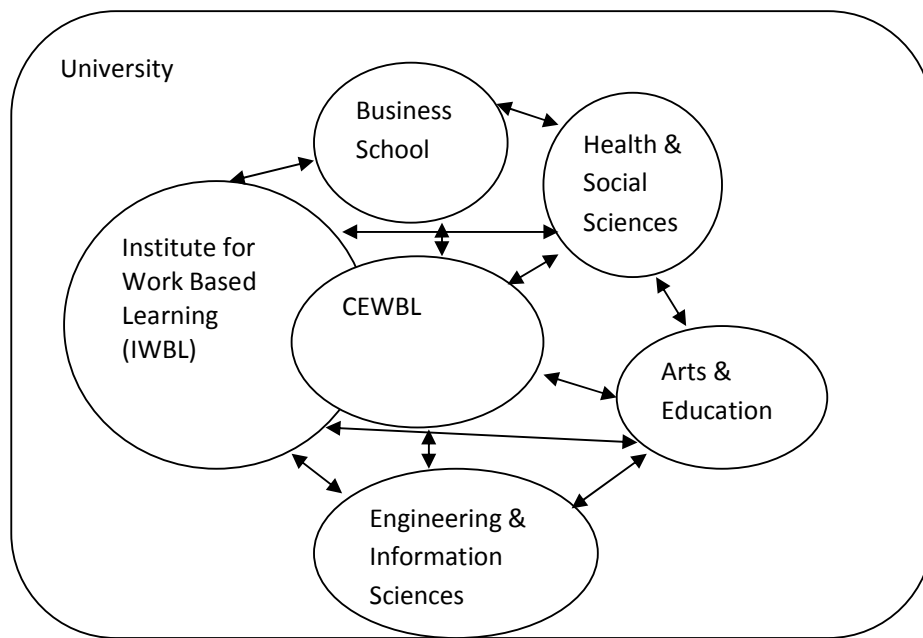
Institutional change

There were a number of institutional changes during the lifetime of the CEWBL which impacted nomenclature and practices. One of the most significant was the creation of a central Institute for WBL (IWBL), extracted from the School (which also changed its name to reflect its subject composition of Arts and Education). The creation of the Institute was important in relation to the University policies in that while the university had increasingly espoused the value and contribution of WBL, the instigation of an institute raised its profile across the institution and articulated the expectation that it was to become a central resource and major contributor to the university's business. The WBL curriculum framework has now become the University WBL curriculum and is accessible for all schools and programmes to use, as well as carrying a variety of award titles that include both WBL and Professional Practice, so reflecting schools' preference for awards with named areas of professional practice. Prior to the CEWBL each school had a particular stance towards WBL (see Garnett, Costley & Workman 2009), but the CEWBL opportunity to influence practice by extending and customising WBL meant that these positions were to change and develop to meet new and emerging needs for both the workplace and the university.

Change strategies in the institution

To develop this opportunity across the university a number of change strategies were undertaken. Land (2001) summarises and categorises a range of change approaches and interpretations which has been used in this article to assist in analysing the CEWBL activities. The first consideration is that of the pervading political culture and strategic plan. Land (2001) argues that university culture is complex and is often hierarchical and relies on recognisable chains of command and pre-determined bureaucratic procedures and roles. He notes in the literature that hierarchy tends to be stronger in the ex-polytechnic sector but may be counterbalanced by a sense of collegiality with a free trade of ideas across the academic community who validate scholarly authority from 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'. Within Middlesex WBL was validated by some from 'bottom up', but not universally. The culture of the Institution is one that is centralised for policy making and direction through avenues such as the Corporate plan and Teaching and Learning strategy, thus promoting a 'top down' approach to management of policies and initiatives, but which simultaneously manages to promote creativity and innovation in certain pockets such as in IWBL.

Nevertheless, where there is innovation and success, resistance and repudiation from traditional academics can also emerge. There were times when 'the prophet was not recognised within his own country', although many enquirers both nationally and internationally have come seeking advice and guidance from IWBL. This leads to a strange dichotomy; WBL is recognised for being innovative, flexible and distinctive externally, but internally is not universally acknowledged by all of its own academic community. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not a singular experience in HE innovations and is shared by other WBL practitioners elsewhere.

High level champions

However, at high level internally there has been significant support. There has been a history of internal champions supporting the development of WBL since its inception in the 1990's and this has continued. This ensures that institutional policy includes a WBL flavour, articulated in the corporate plan and other strategic documents. The HEFCE interim evaluation of the CETLs in 2007 resulted in further inclusion of WBL perspectives and representation across institutional committees as the high level champions were keen to capitalise on achievements completed so far. This enables learning from both of the CETLs to contribute to university policy and practice by influencing the 'unfreezing and moving' (Lewin 1952) stages of planned change by supporting initiatives and providing evidence for change, consequently promoting teaching and learning experiences that are at the heart of the CETL initiative. Significantly, Land (2001) notes the 'moving' phase as being an internal political process as the host environment is prepared for change by activity which disturbs its equilibrium, similarly the CETL initiative itself destabilised HE by attempting to adjust the balance between teaching and research funding and was not universally welcomed (Gosling & Hannan 2007). Unfortunately the CETL initiative has not benefitted from sustained funding beyond five years, unlike research and therefore lasting impact has yet to be assured. It can be extrapolated therefore that high level champions need to be confident in the initiatives they support in order to persevere beyond government initiatives if they want to sustain and cultivate internal innovations such as WBL or other CETL work.

WBL in the Schools

Within the schools the CEWBL coordinators were chosen to reflect their subject disciplines and expertise in educational initiatives. Their initial stances can be read in 'Work Based Learning' Journeys to the Core of Higher Education' (Garnett, Costley & Workman 2009), but their strengths lay in the ability to be discipline focused and therefore translators of the WBL model into their own areas of practice. Table 1 summarises the movement of WBL within each school during the lifetime of the CEWBL.

Table 1: Summary of the outcomes from the CEWBL in each school in relation to the use of the WBL framework .

School	2005	2010
Health and Social Science	Presence of WBL & Accreditation Unit. Active use of WBL modules in some disciplines, notably nursing, mental health, Doctorate in professional Studies (DProf SVP[2]). Accreditation of in-house training already well established	New subject areas including WBL within programmes, such as Sport. New programme validations including elements of WBL e.g. Environmental Sciences, Risk, Tourism, Criminology including research and development modules and WBL projects
Business	Learning from Part Time work modules, use of some WBL modules by joint validation. Work placements/ sandwich courses	DProf SVP, MYSAKE[3] model, employability modules, Additional WBL specific titles to create awards to meet sector needs. Accreditation of in-house training developing
Arts & Education	MA Professional Practice, Education placements & WBL Graduate Teacher Training. Accreditation had been used sporadically	BA Professional Practice[4]; progression route from FD's developed and teaching & learning Web 2.0 approach evaluated for wider adoption. Early years programme using APEL module, extended use of WBL within other subject areas. Accreditation revitalised. 'Professional Practice' piloted as a title in addition to WBL reflecting subject discipline preferences but using the WBL framework
Engineering & Information sciences	Sandwich year & placements. no negotiated WBL	MSc in WBL Networking validated, MSc by Portfolio validated. Accredited programme

By agreeing to become WBL academic developers CEWBL coordinators had no vested interest in maintaining the status quo (Land 2001) and consequently the way they undertook to introduce and

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[2] Doctorate in Professional Studies, Specialist Validated Pathway
[3] My Skills, Attitudes, Knowledge and Emotions – a model developed with CEWBL funding and discussed later
[4] The development of BAPP is discussed later in this article

integrate WBL in a different mode to vocational and placement learning resulted in a mixture of positive and negative experiences for each of them. Some took the approach of 'activist –modellers' using a 'show and tell approach' by introducing programmes designed by using part of the WBL curriculum modules or pedagogical strategies. They facilitated colleagues in making the transition from traditional teaching approaches to using alternative WBL approaches, for example by using empty shell project modules to create negotiated programmes for part time students to undertake in the workplace, integrating new theory into work projects. Other strategies involved the creation of new programmes for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) whereby an organisation would gain university accreditation for in-house training, and then progress to a full university award, such as a Post Graduate Certificate, by adding a WBL negotiated project. This proved popular for organisations such as the police, who provide a lot of their own staff development, but wanted their staff to progress towards post graduate awards. This model was noted and then adopted by other individuals in different subject disciplines, thus extending WBL through 'diffusion' (Land 2001).

Other methods of dissemination included the use of normative-re-educative communication strategies. By providing seminars for colleagues that offered ideas about creating new flexible programmes which some would take up and try out, later becoming advocates, the word spread gradually through different schools. Individuals would ring up or email the CEWBL seeking answers to curriculum conundrums. Activities such as validation events provided the opportunity to share how, for example, APEL or portfolio assessment, might be integrated into programmes. The introduction of a new Masters in sport provided an opportunity to work with a new subject area altogether as many students doing the programme were part time workers doing a full time course, but due to the seasonal aspects of sports wanted a flexible programme to fit round training and events, and found that some WBL modules facilitated this. Using communication strategies and personal networking with individuals who showed interest and curiosity provided routes into programmes which were then used as exemplars with their colleagues. By allowing customisation of approaches and transference of principles rather than imposing specific approaches, the engagement grew incrementally and responsively to local requirements, thus demonstrating an approach to organisational change which Land (2001:12) calls 'disjointed incrementalism', or the 'science of muddling through'; by creating a context in which change is possible.

Project sponsorship

One of the most effective ways of extending WBL was by sponsoring projects in schools. Bids from staff were encouraged that contributed to the targets of the CEWBL. The main CEWBL targets of importance were those requiring an ever increasing number of students influenced by WBL during the CEWBL lifetime. Early on in the CEWBL lifespan, one of the university changes included restructuring of programmes and the flexibility to create major/ minor awards with a mixed choice of modules had been lost, which meant an alternative strategy for involving student and staff through routes other than programmes had to be created. There were three rounds of sponsored project bids and these proved highly effective in engaging staff and students in WBL. For example, within the business school a model called MYSAKE[5] for reflecting upon part time work experience had been created and the staff involved wanted to trial, evaluate and extend it. Funding from the CEWBL enabled the model to be modified and then transferred to an e-portfolio mode (Frame &

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[5] My Skills, Attitudes, Knowledge, and Emotions

Haddock 200X). This latest development coincided with an employability initiative within the school and it was decided that all employability modules within the Business school could use this approach as from September 2010, unfortunately not within the lifetime of the CEWBL. Another project from the Business school which received funding was one that devised a Mentoring programme (Haddock –Millar et al 2010) as a way of sustainable mentoring of undergraduate students by post graduates, so improving the employability of both parties. A project within the School of Health and Social Science developed the use of learning agreements to facilitate embedding new theory into practice experience to enable CPD programmes to be more effective for nurses (Holmshaw & Brown 2010). These projects facilitated the customisation of WBL principles, albeit distant from the core WBL curriculum, but allowing staff to pursue their own interests related to WBL, and which enabled personal and professional development for individuals and provided opportunities for them to be creative (Land 2001). The application for funding meant that there had to be discussion with the CEWBL and this enabled the CEWBL to influence and shape the outcomes to incorporate WBL principles where possible.

Reciprocal innovation

One of the projects in the School of Arts and Education was the creation of a progression route from a Diploma in Higher Education to a Bachelors degree for performing artists, called BAPP (BA Hons Professional Practice). The significance of this for the WBL programmes was not immediately apparent but the project explored e-teaching approaches for off campus students who were emerging professionals rather than experienced professionals as was usually the case in WBL (Moteleb & Durrant 2009). There had been various experiments with different e-learning approaches during the CEWBL but this project centred upon the use of social networking as a teaching tool. By sponsoring the evaluation of the students' experience of learning through Web 2.0, a progression route for Foundation degrees supported by social networking sites and e-learning has been created. The key significance of this has been that learning from the programme has been grafted from the evaluation back into IWBL and is now impacting on the review and revalidation of main WBL programmes in the next academic year. From the perspective of introducing change through the CETL's, this was unexpected, but has been a catalyst for reviewing a number of assumptions within IWBL itself which has been a healthy consequence of exposing our practices to a wider audience.

Facilitation factors

There were several factors that facilitated the uptake of WBL. Firstly, high level managers had to be persuaded that it offered something for them. In places this took some while, but the support of high level champions applied the imperatives and resulted in more creative thinking as to how to incorporate WBL in programmes. It became obvious that to make any kind of progress it was important to start where individuals were and to build on their understanding and willingness, but with the inevitable compromise by the CEWBL regarding the extent of change that could be achieved. It was more effective long term to build on whatever understanding individuals had and work with opportunistic 'cracks' in the system (Land 2001) and exploit them through incentives such as project funding and IT equipment. Part of the CEWBL funding had included a large investment in IT equipment such as laptops and webcams, but over five years these had been superseded by superior models and were less attractive as sweeteners as time went on. Funding projects within

schools opened doors through which to introduce WBL and built relationships between WBL and different disciplines which can now be maintained and further developed.

Another enabling factor was the quality of the staff who promoted particular innovations. It was apparent that those who engaged most actively with the CEWBL were innovators and risk takers, and these were keen to become involved in order to explore their particular interests and would adapt their projects to WBL criteria to gain funding. Academic staff with development skills were at a premium and were difficult to source when there were the inevitable staff changes during the lifetime of the CEWBL. The CEWBL coordinators worked with staff in different departments to raise their understanding, skills and expertise. In order to release Institute staff to undertake WBL developments and publish, personal networks identified some individuals who were willing to be recruited part time to provide sabbatical relief for full time staff. Time out to think and work on new initiatives is difficult to find and it was a bonus to be able to provide it. As Bluteau & Krumins (2008) record, staff often undertook projects because they wanted to even though they could not find suitable academic cover to release them. This was a perpetual challenge for academics, not least in carving out suitable activities that could be given to part time individuals without encroaching too much on specific role responsibilities that could not be delegated, particularly for experienced staff with the most knowledge to share.

Embedding factors

The projects within schools gained interest and cooperation and raised the profile of the CEWBL as a source of funding, while demonstrator projects such as curriculum initiatives showed how things could be done and disseminated examples that inspired others to try similar approaches. These embedded WBL by integrating it into validated programmes so that it would be running for at least six years, allowing staff and students to get used to WBL and transferring principles to other newer programmes in the future. Personal networks that started through early communication strategies and seminars have developed and now when queries arise named individuals in both schools and IWBL are known as resources and trouble shooters. Recently a colleague contacted the CEWBL in June with a cry for help in getting a Foundation Degree validated by September, saying; 'I'm told that if anyone can do it, you can'. As it happens a way has been devised to enable this to happen but it's still a challenge to achieve within 3 months.

The change of focus of WBL to allow schools to customise it and start at their point of need, rather than using a standard WBL curriculum has made quite an impact, both for the schools and for the Institute. The schools have been able to adjust their interpretation of WBL to one that they find less incongruous with their subject disciplines and which they find more user-friendly, such as using 'Professional Practice' as an award title. This has softened some resistors who are responding increasingly positively, although that is partly driven by the additional HEFCE funding which requires even more engagement with employers and WBL, together with the expectations arising from university policies and strategic development plans that demand WBL activities and targets with consequent impact on student numbers. The Institute has also had to review its use of the WBL curriculum framework and philosophies that underpin it. However, the opportunity to put together a pan-university REF application based on educational research has been a positive step at uniting both CETLs and other pedagogical research across the institution. This is an example of unintended consequences of the CETL initiatives whose impact is, as yet, unknown. The personal contacts made

across institutions and externally have the potential to continue, unless and until other government policy directives supersede or override the CETL legacies, which at the time of writing may be sooner than originally thought. Where there have been incremental gains and influence upon teaching and learning practices it is to be hoped that much will be retained and enhanced further.

Implications for the future

Within Middlesex there are some tangible legacies from the CEWBL such as the employability strategy within the Business school that is integrating MYSAKE into its programmes. Learning from the Web 2.0 social networking project is influencing the WBL curriculum for the future and demonstrates the value of evaluating innovative teaching and learning approaches during the development phase. The change of use of the WBL curriculum framework from just IWBL to across the university is important as this promotes a resource for all the university and therefore is increasingly indispensible as parts of it become embedded in programmes.

 Although WBL had been a significant innovation in Middlesex for over a decade before gaining the CEWBL award, it took a further five years of additional funding to strengthen WBL strategically and it benefitted further from a HEFCE employer engagement project which has now overtaken the CEWBL and provides further impetus for extending and embedding WBL deeper into the university systems and infrastructure. This suggests that to make significant change at least five years is needed to make sustained impact, and this time factor may be even more crucial where CETLs were created just for the duration of the CETL project and then disbanded at the end of the funding. Finally, high level support is critical, but not without cost as institutional management must be persuaded of the viability and longevity of the innovation in order to continue to support it beyond specific funding opportunities.

Conclusions

The CETL initiative offered a wide range of exciting opportunities for academic developments. For WBL it has proved powerful in relation to extending footholds into teaching and learning practices and becoming embedded into programmes across the university. In places it is not always easy to see a distinct legacy until programmes are excavated to see where the WBL influences might be, and then it may be found in a reflective assignment or WBL project. Other evidence is much more substantial, such as within the employability modules, but none would have happened without individuals taking hold of the opportunities offered and working to make it happen. It is the commitment of such risk takers and innovators that must be acknowledged from this experience, as well as recognising the culture of the institution which has promoted WBL and enabled it to thrive. The CETL funding provided the incentive to actively engage with experimentation, and speeded up the adoption of WBL. However, evidence suggests that innovation in teaching and learning is not just confined to funded opportunities, as success also resulted from individuals taking up the challenge of introducing something they feel passionately about with just small amounts of funding, within an enabling culture.

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