**The Use of English Literature in the Context of Work-based Learning – a pedagogic case study**

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**Abstract:**

**Although Work Based Learning draws upon theoretical roots from a variety of sources, the practice of Work Based Learning has been typically drawn from disciplines such as health, business and education. Yet the concepts in Work Based Learning, for example, an intense focus on developing intellectual skills such as critical reflection, could conceivably encompass other disciplines. With this in mind, I formulated a course which drew deeply from English literature while using the reflective approach inherent in Work Based Learning. I intend to present a case study of this specific course in the context of a Work Based Learning curriculum. I will present the rationale for adopting this literature based approach and an analysis of the student experience. I hope to demonstrate that the pedagogic model that I developed sits comfortably within a Work Based Learning programme and the benefits of a protean programme which is able to encompass and embrace core aspects of a traditional discipline such as English are self-evident: appreciating the expressive resources of literature, fostering sensitivity to the affective power of language, encouraging a sophisticated interrogation into a literary culture and harnessing the power of reflection being among the many advantages to such an approach. My intention is to persuade curriculum developers that the aims of incorporating English literature, particularly in the concern with developing a responsive openness of mind, could and perhaps should be a part of any Work Based Learning programme.**

**Key works: critical reflection, English literature, case study, work based learning, curriculum development**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Using a qualitative approach and drawing on the experience at a university in the south-east of England, this study provides an exploration of and insights into incorporating English literature in journal reflection within the context of Work-**

**based Learning. My rationale for developing the module “Effective reading and writing” was to help students improve their critical and analytical writing skills by introducing them to excellent writing replete with persuasive, robust arguments and exemplary, timeless style. My background of teaching undergraduate level English literature had made me acutely aware that many Work-based Learning students who were exposed to a plethora of writing that strongly reflected educational and business philosophy and psychology had not been given the opportunity to engage with great minds from the literary world. I wanted to narrow the gap between the - at times - didactic and highly specialised writing associated with the adherents of Work-based Learning and more literary writing.**

**One of the purposes of both Work-based Learning and literature is self-exploration and, it seemed self-evident, that a marriage could be engineered. The means by which I would endeavour to effect this alliance would be through learning journals. Through my own research, I have yet to find any studies detailing the use of learning journals in the delivery of English literature in a Work-based Learning curriculum. This paper explains why I decided to integrate English literature into my course, demonstrates how I did so and finally draws the wider universal conclusions of my findings.**

**CONTEXT**

**The use of learning journals has been well documented, and support for their use points to helping students practise continuous learning by regularly enquiring into their thoughts and actions as well as integrating their reading, observations and experiences and generally facilitating cognitive development. The learning journal should integrate theory with experience (Schön, 1987; Brookfield, 2009; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Brockbank & McGill, 2007). The teacher is able to help students achieve the learning outcomes of the course as well as regularly monitor students’ progress and effectively assess what he or she has taught. As Dewey (1916) demonstrated, individuals reflect for a purpose that leads to the processing of a useful outcome and this process of**

**reflection can be encouraged in a practical sense through the learning journal.**

**In the context of learning journals and teaching, I had been guided by leading proponents of the use of learning journals such as Moon (2000) who suggests that refection can be an orientation to our everyday lives, Langer (2002) who believes the journals assist students “in conceptualising abstract meaning and relating it to practice” (341) and from whom I devised the structure of my course, Varner and Peck (2003), who discuss the theoretical grounding for using reflective writing as a learning strategy. Finally, Crème (2008) in her philosophical discussion of Winnicott and play, was and is influential in shaping my practice. I will position their findings as well as other relevant writers such as Brookfield and Schön into the context of my own work.**

**I will argue that literature can function as a change agent and, by using learning journals to synthesise literary experience and knowledge, Work-based Learning can incorporate a rich area of exploration to its curriculum. Thus, my aim is not only to describe my journal approach through a format of rationale, assessment and evaluation in demonstrating my own experience of how journaling encourages deeper reflection, but I also hope to show how my assimilation of an aspect of the English literature syllabus strengthens such reflection.**

**Cornford (2002) argues that the reflective approach that has become so widely adopted in teacher education lacks any empirical evidence to support its effectiveness. He notes that increased reflection does not necessarily translate to improvements in teaching and learning. Because there is no unanimous agreement on what reflective practice constitutes, there is an “over-reliance” on case studies.**

**I appreciate Cornford’s argument on the need for both qualitative and quantitative evaluation and his insistence on an objective, quantitative measurement to gauge goal attainment, but I cannot accept that everything that happens during the teaching/learning process can be subjected to rigid measurement. Therefore, I make no apologies for offering this purely qualitative case study on how literature delivered**

**in the form of reflective journal entries was beneficial to my students: the recorded student comments lend it credible “food for thought”. Moreover, Cornford himself recognises that there is a need for the development of critically reflective skills that do involve considerable practice and feedback (231). As Brookfield (2009:89) posits: central to reflective thinking is the ability to challenge the assumptions by which we live. In harnessing the experience and collective wisdom of essayists throughout history – Montaigne, Bacon, Steele, Addison, Pope and Pater, for example – students were able to challenge some of the entrenched practices in their workplace and began to make sense of their experiences in a critical vein.**

**DISCUSSION**

**“Effective reading and writing” was offered for the first time in the summer of 2010 to all undergraduates on the Work­based Learning Programme. Its central purpose was to foster in students the development of a literary response which would allow them a new understanding of the world from examining the ancient art of rhetoric. By investigating the structure and function of language, exploring narrative style and looking closely at what writers do linguistically, the students were encouraged to be more aware of the subtleties and nuances of the English language. An additional benefit of this literary approach to Word-based Learning was the illumination of life and work that emerged from researching the lives and works of great essayists and then from the management of such critical reflection into a weekly learning journal which served as a basis for formative assessment. Kerka (2002:1) writes that a journal is “a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning.”**

**The intended subject specific outcomes focused on critically evaluating relevant concepts to analyse issues in the workplace, demonstrating the ability to provide strategies to workplace problems and exploring critical and evaluative skills in written communication. Students were encouraged to examine workplace issues not only through theoretic enquiry**

**but through reflection on the words of great minds normally associated with an English literature curriculum.**

**Twelve students, all female between the ages of late thirties and mid-fifties who had been on the UG Work-based Learning Programme for two, four or six terms (either at C or I level), signed up for this six week 15 credit module. The tacit aim was to demonstrate that literature was not a sacrosanct object for reverential study but a practical and robust way of integrating Work-based Learning philosophies with the benefits brought on by studying an English literature curriculum. No students on the course had studied English literature at HE level, although two were following an English linguistics curriculum as the “subject” component of their Work-based Learning programme. Journaling was used to monitor their research progress, record such reflections on their research (and on the course in general) and to provide formative assessment.**

**The students had all studied Schön in previous modules and were encouraged to use his reflection-in-action model as an integral part of their professional development. In other words, the students needed to recognise that what they had been thinking and doing all along as professionals sometimes does not work: they needed to break free of their own recurring impasses (seen in their initial comments about the writers they were going to research). According to Schön ( 1987:28) teachers need to help learners reflect on their experience and learn from the process and outcomes of such reflection. Journaling permitted the students to reflect by writing about what they were learning: insights from famous essayists that could shed light on their current work practices. It was particularly beneficial in that it allowed the students to break down material that was potentially complex and mystifying. Initial comments on studying/researching were illuminating (if not dismaying):**

**“I don’t see how a lot of dead, white men are going to help my practice”.**

**“I hated English at school and am not sure how it’s going to help me now.”**

**“I am giving it a try but I’m not confident about it.” “I’m doing this only to get my 15 credits.”**

**The students were asked to write about their research process on a weekly basis and were encouraged to share their reflections in class the following week. By the process of blind selection (folded pieces of paper), students chose one essayist to research and report on through their weekly journal entries – Montaigne, Bacon, Pope, Pater, Dickens, Steele, Addison, Defoe, Eliot, Swift, Woolf and Mailer were the essayists for consideration. I developed a series of prompts to promote their reflection:**

* **What do you find exhilarating/frustrating about your research?**
* **What problems have you met in your search and how are you addressing/overcoming/resolving them?**
* **How is your research developing your intellectual needs?**
* **How is your research broadening your knowledge or changing your practice?**
* **Is it making any impact on your professional work?**
* **Is it supporting your professional development?**
* **What areas of expertise are you developing through your research?**
* **How far have your evaluative skills been developed through your research?**

**As Ferry and Ross-Gordon (1998) have argued, there is not necessarily a conclusive link between experience and practice. In other words, the amount of experience a person possesses does not necessarily mean that the person will use reflective practice. These were all women with years of either managerial or senior administrative experience in the NHS,**

**private industry or HE and, who, by training and necessity, had developed expert ways of managing their time and workload. However, prompts were useful in directing them down more reflective paths. After the first week journal entries reflected a measurable attitudinal change to the course content:**

**“Bacon’s writing on how people should live their lives successfully has started me thinking about how I deal with everyday frustrations and problems”**

**“When I did English at secondary school years ago, it was all about correct spelling and grammar. I’m learning now that how you communicate your thoughts is as important as having the thoughts.”**

**“George Eliot is able to persuade the reader of her argument [that writers like Thomas Carlyle who can inspire are the most influential] by presenting evidence to support her claims. I realised that I was losing marks in essays because I wasn’t presenting evidence. Additionally, if you don’t present evidence at work, your argument will hold no water.”**

**“I never even knew Dickens wrote essays. I’m finding myself enjoying learning more and more about him and his style of writing. I’m not sure if this is making any impact on my professional work but I’m still enjoying the research.”**

**From the outset of my involvement in Work-based Learning, I have been convinced of the centrality of critical thinking encouraged by reflection and managed in weekly journal entries. As Brookfield (2009:7) comments:**

**As we abandon assumptions that had been inhibiting our development, we experience a sense of liberation. As we realise we have the power to change aspects of our lives, we are charged with excitement. As we realise these changes, we feel a pleasing sense of self-confidence.**

**I developed the “Effective reading and writing” module because I was similarly convinced that exploring the**

**knowledge gleaned by reading great writers would enhance the students’ learning and provide a valuable opportunity to engage with with texts to which they had seldom or never been exposed. On embarking on studies that were challenging and a bit out of the ordinary, these students were beginning to question their resistance to English literature. If Boud and Symes in “Learning for Real” (in Symes & McIntyre eds 2000:4) view Work-based Learning as “quite literally the foundation of the curriculum [and] the activity from which learning arises”, the inclusion of elements from the English literature curriculum can be not only enriching but also yet another strand to help students address and solve the challenges they will inevitably encounter personally, professionally and academically. Such inclusion can also make more critical readers of students.**

**After being asked to examine Belbin’s writing style in *Management Teams: Why they succeed or fail* (2004), a text that appeared on their reading lists throughout their Programme, many students wrote that the style was “unclear” and “difficult to get through”. One student stated that this “opaqueness” was shared with many other writers they had examined so far, citing Kolb in particular. Another student thought that Belbin used language to “pad out the text”. As part of that week’s assignment – students were asked also to focus on how their research was developing their intellectual needs as well as supporting their professional development. A student researching Bacon wrote the following:**

**“In 1625 Bacon tells us: `Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but he revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince’s part to pardon...’”**

**Since the dominant learning outcome within the module was to evaluate relevant concepts to analyse issues in the workplace and demonstrate the ability to provide strategies to workplace problems, I reminded students to reflect on whether**

**Belbin and/or their writer (in this case Bacon) had any lessons for them. The student continued:**

**“I am presently undergoing problems in my department. There is major restructuring going on and people are naturally tense and sometimes downright unpleasant. My line manager, for example, who has limited experience of managing and just seems to get everyone’s backs up has blocked a move for me that I’ve wanted for a long time with a feeble excuse. I believe that he doesn’t want me to go because I do above and beyond my workload and he’s depended on my level of expertise. I read the requisite chapter on Belbin about unsuccessful teams and recognised some of the points he was making about team morale as relevant - `intense personal conflicts between members did arise in a number of companies but these conflicts did not necessarily presage poor results’ (p 75 -6). I think this is true and made me think that our department is successful no matter much enmity exists between different members of the group. However, in researching Bacon, I came across these words (above) from `On Revenge’. Even though it was written in 1625 it really spoke to me. I thought that instead of expending all my energy on hating this individual and even plotting against him, I would develop strategies for dealing with him and getting where I want to be. I remembered that doing this degree is part of the strategy and it calmed me down and made me refocus.”**

**Although there were limitations to my study in terms of student numbers and assessment, there were common themes that emerged from incorporating literature into a Work-based Learning course and doing so in the form of a learning journal. Students appeared to accept a literature element into their course of study and were able to find the connections between their essayist and their practice. Additionally, the use of learning journals in their research, although not exploited to their full potential, proved fruitful in terms of both reflection and in organisational/management skills. Finally, the assimilation of literature and journalling seemed to help students see the connections between what a “great thinker”**

**thought of his/her world and how the student practitioner made sense of her own.**

**A student who was researching Alexander Pope decided to analyse “The Rape of the Lock” as one of her journal entries. She quoted:**

**“What dire Offence from am’rous Causes springs, What mighty Contests rise from trivial things” (1.1-2) and then commented:**

**“The incident at the centre of the poem is the Baron’s theft of a lock of hair and then the problems that come between the two families involved. The opening lines of the poem introduce the reader to the ironic and humorous attitude that Pope has to the society he is living in. He is telling his readers that these families are taking something quite small and blowing it out of all sense of proportion. It is a trivial incident and they are taking it to extremes. They are taking the incident too seriously and they are taking themselves too seriously. They have grossly inflated their sense of importance.”**

**Then the student reflected on her own position in the workplace, drawing on Belbin’s 2004 *Management Teams. Why they succeed or fail*. She wrote:**

**“An effective team has a range of individuals who contribute in different ways and understand the tasks they have to do. It should comprise a democratic leader who can deal with the differences of opinions and whose team members feel free to criticise in a positive manner. My team is more ineffective than effective. One or two talk more than they listen. Other members’ views are dismissed or ridiculed. These one or two members dominate and make all the decisions. There is a lack of clarity regarding goals and roles not being delegated to particular team members. Like Pope’s depiction of the “dysfunctional” families in “Rape”, one or two of these team members are puffed up with an exaggerated sense of their**

**own importance. Pope understood how lack of perspective damages work relations, family relations, relations in society.”**

**Through student testimonies, we can see how literature can not only aid in reflection but has the added value of developing students’ literary, social and historical awareness. To draw a connection between an eighteenth century essayist and one’s present working conditions can challenge classroom conventions epistemologically.**

**One of my questions for their journals was to explore whether the essayist was still influential today? Could we learn lessons from his or her writing? A student working for the NHS wrote the following which reinforces Crème’s (2008: 50) contention that the learning journal not only helps students to engage meaningfully with their university work, but also allows them to explore “the unfolding process between the inkling of an idea and its fruition”:**

**“Addison once said, `I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I have brought philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies and at tea-tables and coffee houses.’ He is writing about how important it is to have the public discussing and thinking about your ideas. Even though Addison was an educated man, he used everyday English in his writing to capture the public’s attention. Where I work in the NHS, the way we communicate our ideas is at times unclear. Addison knew that to connect with the public, you had to use terms that they were familiar with.”**

**As Moon (2009:76) reminds us, for most students (and I would contend most people), the idea of *focused* reflection is “alien”. She suggests that reflection in the context of an educational process can be triggered by one’s efforts to understand something that challenges one’s presuppositions (83). In the context of this Work-based Learning module, research on the essayists – their background, philosophy, life and bearing on current practice (!) – would invariably lead to transformative learning. Studies in journal writing point to a student’s sense of “ownership” in his or her learning (86). In**

**my class students began to discuss their essayists with the same sense of ownership:**

**“I feel like a new world has opened up to me when I read about Steele. I don’t know how he had the energy to write about so many diverse subjects.”**

**In fact students became rather emotionally involved in their own essayists. This sense of personal pride in what their essayists had achieved came forth in their journal entries: Comments such as:**

**“My essayist, Jonathan Swift, was a satirist who influenced too many writers to enumerate. In the 20th century, for example, someone like George Orwell used satire to make serious statements on the dangers of sweeping social changes taking place through Europe and the United States. Satire has the power to influence and is used in TV programmes such as “Have I Got News for You” and “The Simpsons” which can have political and social influence. Swift was the grandfather of satire.”**

**led me to believe in the emotional attachment of students to their subjects. Research from Boud, Cohen and Walker (2009: 104,5) reveals not only the link between reflection and emotion but that between emotion and cognition which would suggest that the more strongly one feels about something, particularly instigated through the process of reflection, the more one is processing his or her learning. My observations certainly bore this out.**

**The journal entries became mini-presentations leading cumulatively to a final presentation at the end of the six week period. On a weekly basis students would volunteer their thoughts prompted by a specific question and we would discuss their findings as a group. The mini-presentations triggered formative feed-back and had the further advantage of preparing students for their final presentations by building up their confidence levels and ensuring incremental knowledge and familiarity with their subject matter. As Moon (83) categorically states, “reflection comes about when**

**Guidance was harnessed through the use of learning journals. Incentive, other than the oft stated fact that students wished to complete their UG degrees, came about from an immersion in the kind of research they had never come across before. In previous modules much as “Accreditation of Prior Learning”, “Programme Planning” and “Reflective Practice”, students had, for the most part, been guided through their Work-based Learning as a “field of study” in its own right rather than just “a mode of study” (Garrett and Workman in Garnett, Costley and Workman, eds, 2009).**

**conditions in the learning environment are appropriate – when there is an incentive or some guidance.”**

**METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

**Instruction drew on the adult learning theories and work itself became the subject discipline. There is much of value in this approach, indeed students are perfectly comfortable with the idea, but I wanted to draw out academic literacy by using literature as a natural medium.**

**Students who at the beginning of the module could not or *would* not see the connection between what a long dead essayist had to say about life and work and what Work-based Learning studies in 2010 informed them, had their assumptions, beliefs and values challenged. This, Brookfield (2009: 7,8) claims, is central to critical thinking and ultimately to all Work-based learning. Such students:**

**are open to jettisoning old assumptions when these are clearly inappropriate (for example, `workers are there to work, not to think; decisions made by executive directors, parents, and presidents are infallible and inviolable’...) and to search for new assumptions that fit more closely their experiences of the world.**

**Ironically, many of the essayists fit comfortably in the Enlightenment tradition which Brookfield believes reflective practice (particularly supported by the medium of writing in a journal) remains within. Reflective practice is part of the Enlightenment tradition which requires practitioners to stand outside, examine critically and make sense of what they are experiencing.**

**In terms of the format of learning journals – unstructured, structured or dialogue based – I decided to impose a form of constraint on the students, requiring them to write in a structured manner which could elicit responses to be compared, shared and discussed. Students were required not only to write about the week’s seminar but also about their research. I have chosen a case study method for this research, a descriptive approach which should allow me to illustrate the format I developed. Underlying my method of research is the belief that the value of my findings lies in their use for other practitioners of Work-based Learning. Although this course/module was delivered only once and to a small number of students, I would contend that there are illustrations which demonstrate what may be achieved through the mix of literature and reflective learning journals in the delivery of a Work-based module.**

**As we have seen, the number of participants was very small, so the qualitative results can only be indicative and would need to be supported by quantitative work on a much larger group before firm conclusions can be drawn. Although, in theory, keeping a learning journal could enforce the discipline on students to review class discussion and confirm their understanding of the material, the journals were not collected or marked. Unlike essays, learning journals do not have a fixed rhetorical structure so that writing can be expressive and “free”; however, such freedom from constraints was not always perceived as positive. Students needed a great deal of guidance and expressed grave concerns initially about what was expected of them, primarily, and questioned the pedagogical rationale for journaling, secondly.**

**There is evidence that learning journals could reduce anxiety regarding summative assessment because of their incremental, formative “atmosphere of enquiry” (Langer, 2002:341) and that they could be used in a helpful way to “ease” the students into essays. Yet I believe that a structured approach is the only one that could have worked with my students. Langer**

**(345) offers prompts such as: how can I best organise the structure of this learning, which main parts have I understood, which parts haven’t I understood? I went further by structuring a set of questions that the students could use to frame their research. Similarly, many findings on learning journals used within or not within Work-based Learning discuss the “journey” of exploring one’s learning by writing thoughts over the duration of a course. Hall, Ramsey and Raven (2004) argue that a well designed education process can assist students in engaging at a deeper level of awareness than conventional methods – this argument is put forth innumerable times though articles on the benefits of learning journals. However, issues regarding the assessment process as well as quality assurance proved difficult. Varner and Peck (2003), Crème (2008) and Moon (1999) have all detailed the challenges faced in grading and evaluating learning journals, particularly noting their subjective nature which defies standardised assessment. As Crème (2008) points out, assessment is linked to students’ belief in what is important to reflect, so an ungraded learning journal might foster poor preparation. Although the summative assessment of a presentation based on both research on the essayist and the journal entries informing such research had clear marking criteria, I think I was remiss in not establishing marking criteria for the journals themselves.**

**As students’ comments reveal, marking is very much valued by them. These comments were collated from their module evaluations after the course was delivered:**

**“I put a lot of work into the journal entries and would have liked that reflected in my final grade.”**

**“I got a good grade [on the presentation] and I’m happy about that but I still think we should have had a separate marking for our journal work.”**

**“I enjoyed the research but didn’t like having to provide input every week into what I was doing. Besides there was no grade.”**

**“Reviewing and sharing our work every week is a good idea. Not getting credit for it isn’t.”**

**Varner and Peck (2003:59) admit that grading can be challenging by forcing teachers to make “uncomfortable value judgments” and often making it unavoidable “to penalise poor writers”. However, we see that students’ comments on the course, when prompted about the journaling element, focused on the lack of marking their journals. Although reflective depth was encouraged, students – due to a lack of time and, more crucially, lack of assessment – regretted that they had not spent as much time of their journals as they could have had. In retrospect, I should have provided clear assessment guidance at the outset in order for the students to develop their self-knowledge as fully as possible.**

**CONCLUSION**

**The purpose of this paper was to present a case study of a course that was taught through a blend of requiring research on writers and reflective journalling and then assessed by a means of formative (journal entries shared and discussed) and summative (final formal presentations) feedback. My development of the module was predicated on the belief that literature could act as a powerful change agent by developing students’ cultural awareness and that literature offered a natural medium for students to acquire “a profound knowledge of language that *goes beyond the utilitarian*” (Bassnett and Grandy, 1993: 7, my emphasis). I would content that language was only one of the elements with which students engaged. A comment from their evaluations was indicative of the entire class’s learning experience:**

**“This course provided an opportunity to practice more in­depth research and critical analysis in a subject I may not normally have chosen for myself. Looking at literary figures and reading and hearing about their work took me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to prove to myself that I was capable of producing a good standard of work based on a formerly unknown area. I found the subject engaging and enjoyable as well as being a welcome change to my usual modules.”**

**Reflective practice through journalling was the means of facilitating the connections between theory learned on the course, insights gleaned by researching the essayists and the students’ day to day practice. As Varner and Peck (2003: 54) discovered, the learning journal can produce learning outcomes with both an inward and outward focus – self­awareness is developed as well as knowledge of the course material. Yet the learning journal represents the means, albeit an excellent and useful means, of recording learning. Introducing students to the shrewd insights of a seventeenth century essayist like Bacon or a twentieth century polemicist like Mailer does take students “out of [their] comfort zone” and plunge them into “a formerly unknown area”. However, in this module, Bacon and Mailer were able to help students to demonstrate the ability to provide strategies to work place problems as well as giving them the additional bonus of exploring their own critical skills by examining the written language of some of the most skilled communicators who have ever lived.**

**I believe I have demonstrated some ideological and practical insights to offering a Work-based Learning course marrying literature and journal use. I am convinced that the learning journal remains a potent tool in the arsenal of materials used to engage learners in the skills of enquiry. Furthermore, incorporating aspects of a rich field such as English literature allowed students to become open to alternative theories, challenge their attitudes, jettison old ways of thinking – in short, through learning, self-analysing and reflecting, to improve practice.**

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