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“It’s almost like a medal that you wear afterwards”: undergraduate student experiences of work-related learning in the public and third sectors

Angeliki Triantafyllaki and Catherine Smith

Introduction

Work-related learning (WRL) promotes learning across the lifespan as it involves “students learning about themselves and the world of work in order to empower them to enter and succeed in the world of work and their wider lives” (Moreland, 2005:4). Learning gained through work experience, volunteering and extra-curricular activities can have considerable impact on students’ personal development, increasing their levels of confidence in the workplace and equipping them with the skills to develop their professional careers (Ball, 2003; Drury, 2007). However, WRL in the public and third sectors, in particular, is often undervalued and separate from course activities (see also Drury, 2007). A recent study of entrepreneurial education in creative subjects (Art Design Media Subject Centre (ADM-HEA) and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), 2007) found that students describe their own work-related learning activities that are oriented towards cultural, social and not-for-profit activities as “entrepreneur-like”, arguing that “they demand similar skills and attributes to those needed when working in commercial sectors” (p. 58). Yet, little explicit evidence exists of the benefits to students’ learning through participating specifically in public and third sector activities, and the transferability of creativity and skills gained in both curriculum and extra-curricular work-based activities.

Creative Interventions: valuing and assessing creativity in student work-related learning in the public and third sectors

The Creative Interventions project (funded by the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project strand, 2007-08) seeks to explore the ways in which work-related learning in the public and third sectors, encountered during a creative arts higher education, is valued and fostered by students, tutors and employers. The project aims to identify:

- the types of WRL experiences that creative arts students have in public, not-for-profit and voluntary work contexts
- the ways in which creative learning developed via HE transfers into contexts beyond the higher education institution (HEI)

- the creative agencies that enable learners to tackle challenging situations and problems in WRL contexts, and
- the ways in which student WRL experiences provided by both curriculum-based and extra-curricular activities are recognised and valued.

It is hoped that the identification of procedures for assessing and rewarding such learning, and for overcoming the inherent difficulties (i.e. assessing group or multidisciplinary work), will bring benefits for the whole HE sector.

Informed by literature on WRL, employability and creative arts education, the following concept map was developed. The cross-section in the middle represents the project’s focus of (a) students’ experiences (skills, attributes, understandings) of work-related learning activities in the public and third sectors; and (b) the role of a creative arts HE in the development of the transferability of these experiences. More information can be found at: <http://creativeinterventions.pbwiki.com>

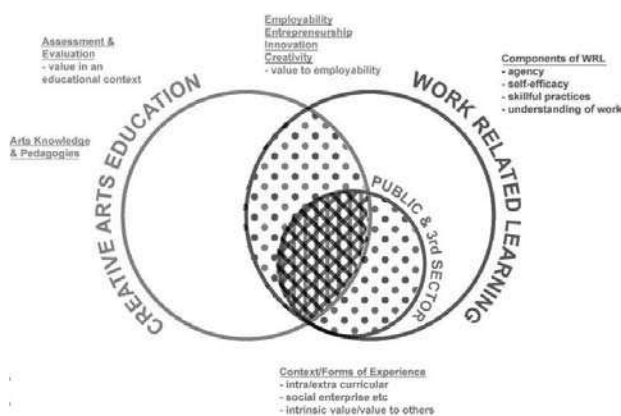


Figure 1: Creative Interventions project concept map

Research approach

The Creative Interventions project employs a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative components (Bergman, 2008). The aim is to provide an overview of students’, tutors’ and employers’ views of WRL activities, in addition to more detailed, illustrative examples from creative arts disciplines. During an initial qualitative phase, pilot interviews were conducted within the partner institutions that, together with the review of the literature, informed the design of the electronic survey. The survey, currently underway, investigates the perceived value to stakeholders of WRL activities,

their locations within and outside the curriculum, and the nature of assessment used to recognise and reward students' learning in these contexts.

During the second year of the project a series of in-depth institutional and disciplinary case studies (Stake, 2005) will be conducted, drawing on existing examples provided by project partners and examples identified through the survey. These will aim to examine course structures and assessment formats, student narratives of learning and engagement, tutor evaluation of issues surrounding WRL activities and employers'/host organisations' perspectives of the benefits to students. Case studies will also generate multimedia materials for students and staff, focusing on the learning outcomes of participating in such activities and ways these might be valued and recognised at individual and institutional levels.

Pilot case study: The Sorrell Foundation Young Design Programme

The Sorrell Foundation's Young Design Programme (YDP) "joins up pupils in primary and secondary schools with students at university and designers in industry" (Sorrell Foundation, 2007:2). During the six-month duration of the programme, "the school pupils act as clients by commissioning a school design project, and their consultants are students of design at a college or a university who, in turn, are mentored by professional designers and architects" (Rudd, Marshall & Marson-Smith, 2008:2). The value of the YDP lies primarily in its emphasis on developing participants' professional skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving and presentation skills. More information can be found at:

www.thesorrellfoundation.com/young_design_programme.html

Previous evaluations of the programme reported that students were hungry to experience multi-disciplinary working on socially responsible live projects, as well as eager to test their design skills and theoretical knowledge on authentic 'real world' situations beyond the context of the HEI. Students articulated improved analytical, communication and presentation skills, and above all increased flexibility and confidence to deal with complex professional situations (Smith, 2008).

The aims of the YDP pilot case study were (a) to synthesise data and observations from previous reports and (b) to gather further evidence on students' and tutors' perceptions of students' learning outcomes and creative development that would also inform the design of the electronic survey. At the time of submission of this paper, collected data included audio-recorded focus groups and individual interviews with student participants from previous years and their tutors respectively. Photographic material was compiled and used during interviews as a stimulus to reflection. A qualitative content analysis approach was employed through the systematic process of coding and identifying themes in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), guided both by previous reports and the aims of the Creative Interventions project.

The YDP was described as "a breath of fresh air" by students in that it came at a critical time during their course when they needed inspiration from an external source, as it "had the kind of motivation that I'd looked at alternative things. It was just building up the foundations of your personal practice". Students' motivation for taking part stemmed mostly from the moral and social value of working with children on a project initiated by them and for them and their schools.

Students pointed out that the programme developed their creativity, in that they were encouraged to "step up" in their game, "think outside the box" and "come up with something that hadn't been made before". Contrasting the programme with the more individualistic and competitive nature of their university work, students highlighted how teamwork also developed their creativity, because they had to construct their own identity within the group and negotiate ways to collaborate effectively with others. Creativity was also linked to other attributes such as striving to make connections between old and new knowledge; engaging with different ways of thinking as a result of being part of a multidisciplinary team; and being flexible and persevering in order to meet clients' needs.

The main learning outcomes identified by their tutors were opportunities made available to students to develop their presentation skills through constant consideration of how best to

present to individuals who knew little about design, and to collaborate effectively with a diverse group of people over an extended period of time. In relation to creativity in particular, tutors argued that working within a highly structured framework and with often conflicting interests and constraints was critical to the development of students' creative thinking and engagement.

The value of having taken part in such a programme remained with students after their graduation and in the workplace. As one graduate pointed out: "I'm really happy I took part ... it's almost like a medal that you wear afterwards." A key outcome of the programme highlighted by both students and their tutors was the development of a student voice, in that it provided students with a space where their ideas would be welcomed as well as challenged; a framework where opportunities to take initiatives and greater responsibility for their own learning abounded; and, essentially, an empowering experience where autonomy and independent thought were highly prized as a result of valuing individual students' expertise when working within a multidisciplinary team. In relation to the Creative Interventions project aims, this pilot case study provided rich information and clear direction for subsequent work on (a) the type, structure and organisation of WRL experiences creative arts students might encounter in the public sector; (b) the creative agencies (i.e. autonomy, independent thought) that enable students to tackle challenging situations within work-related activities; and (c) the value of this public sector activity for both students and their tutors.

There is now a growing body of research on the development of creativity in HE (Hardie, 2007; Jackson, Oliver, Shaw & Wisdom, 2006; Dineen, 2006). The transferability of creativity is key to Government education agendas and to the development of the creative economy (Seltzer and Bentley, 1999). Greater incorporation of WRL activities into the curriculum could increase the perceived value and awareness of skills gained and make explicit the transferability of students' creative attributes, enhancing graduate employability.

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We are looking for willing partners who could distribute our electronic surveys in their institutions. All responses will be treated anonymously, participants will be credited and the resulting paper will be made publicly available. We are also keen to hear from anyone researching or teaching in the area of creativity, or whose students are engaged in work-related learning in the public or third sectors, as we are interested in gathering case studies from a range of institutions. If you are interested in distributing the survey or contributing a case study, please contact Catherine Smith, project manager, c.h.smith@lcc.arts.ac.uk