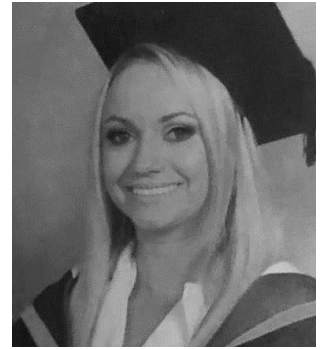

Work-Based Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Learning and Doing?

Siobhan Sentry

Master of Education



Siobhan Sentry graduated in 2011 from the Institute of Technology Tralee with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Health, Fitness and Leisure. Siobhan took her first major step into training and education as a sole trader and owner of private adult education academy 'Advanced Fitness Education', accredited by UK awarding body ITEC. Siobhan graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2017 with a Post Graduate Diploma in Adult and Further Education, she then went on to study for a Master of Education, graduating in 2018. Throughout her 8 years in the adult education she has worked on various Community Education programmes and Vocational Training programmes for various ETB's across Ireland. She now works full time as an Employer Based Training Co-ordinator with the National Learning Network.

KEYWORDS: Adult Education, Experiential Learning;

INTRODUCTION

This article provides a snapshot of some key findings from a larger research study exploring perspectives of adult learners within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. This study is an exploratory, qualitative study, exploring students' perspectives of work based learning in preparing them for the labour market. Work Based Learning is a curriculum approach whereby students engage with a work experience, usually on a long-term basis, as a supplement to their theoretical studies within their chosen field, in a mutually beneficial relationship (Boud and Solomon, 2001). As this is a relatively new and broad field of education there is little research of commonalities between work-based learning programmes, this study examines one example.

The FET Strategy 2014-2019 outlines a key aim; to provide skills for the economy, addressing current and future needs of learners, job-seekers, employers and employees. This study is intended to look at the experience of the adult learner engaging in work-based learning, to analyse the alignment with the key policy aim of addressing the needs of learners in relation to their skills for their chosen vocation. The study aims to explore their perspectives of the structures that constitute work-based learning. This study questions if work-based

learning encourages additional practical and vocational skill acquisition that traditional education does not? Thus, bridging the gap between learning and doing.

The primary method of data collection used was semi structured interviews. The secondary source of data used was the researchers' reflective diary, documenting observations during interviews, the research process and interactions with critical friends and colleagues. The data was analysed using an inductive thematic networking and coding process, this was followed by a deductive round of coding to check accuracy of the analysis process. Findings showed that participants who received support from a dedicated person within the workplace (mentor) and those who were given increasing responsibility within the workplace experienced positive learning and skill development. Participants opinions of the transferral of learning from the classroom to the workplace varied dependant on the programme of study. However, a strong finding appeared on the importance of work-related social skill development within the classroom.

CONTEXT

Adult education in Ireland emerged from cultural and agricultural developments in the late 1900s, social cohesion, active citizenship, equality, and inclusion were at the forefront of the agenda (Grummell 2007). Over time adult education has evolved in line with globalization, advances in technology and with political and economic movements. The recession of 2008 had a significant impact on the sector bringing with it the need for economic growth and labour market activation. Both the adult education sector and vocational training sector merged to become the FET sector. The merging of the sector was in line with the change in focus of the sector, where the balance tipped in favour of labour market activation. Some may argue that holistic outcomes such as active citizenship and social integration became mere by-products of entering the labour market, rather than worthy goals in their own right. Grummell argues, 'that adult education principles are increasingly being colonized by a neo-liberal economic and political logic' (2007, p.182). S/he describes this new focus of adult education as working to the advantage of the economic marketplace, quoting Vincent (1993), adult education is becoming part of the "symbolic gloss of popular democracy" (p.182). This study examines the learners' perspectives of their education experience within the knowledge economy shaped by policy makers.

One may argue that students preparing to enter the workforce need more than theoretical knowledge and skills. According to Moon (2004) reflective practice plays an important role in the development of employability skills and positive student experiences in work experience. However, Moon (2004) also points out that superficial reflection may not be beneficial to learning; that an awareness of the depth of reflection needs to be created. Lave and Wenger (1991) situated learning theory encourages one to wonder, what good is theoretical knowledge if work related social skills remain underdeveloped? Without the development of work-related social skills how can one move from the periphery of the field to being a player in the field? (Bourdieu 1977). It appears from the literature that being competent in the work force requires more than theoretical knowledge and the

physical capacity to do the job. The question remains, are work based learning programmes bridging the gap between learning and doing adequately? Raising these questions is essential if we are to do what policy is asking and encourage those on the margins of society into the workforce through active inclusion; as set forth by The European Parliament (2015)

METHODOLOGY

As this research aims to explore perspectives and experience, the primary method of data collection was face to face, one to one, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were based on semi-structured, open-ended questions with opportunities for deep exploration to gain insights into the perspectives and views of the participants (Creswell 2014). Using purposive sampling, students were chosen from three different disciplines of study; Group 1 (N=3), Group 2 (N=3) and Group 3 (N=3).

A secondary source of data included the researchers' reflective diary, which provided a multitude of uses.

- monitoring observations during interviews
- noting engagements with critical friends
- reflecting on thoughts and feelings throughout the study

As the researcher resides in an interpretivist paradigm a thematic coding analysis was essential, as identified by Flick (2005) 'The underlying assumption is that in different social worlds or groups, differing views can be found' (p.185). An inductive coding strategy was used as the first step of the analysis process, 'allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data' (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, p.86). Interview transcripts were broken down in interpreted concepts, termed 'codes' these codes were attached to the transcripts in forms of annotations. Recognizing that coding is an interpretive act dependent upon the researchers ontological, epistemological values, while also, realising through the lived experience of the field, that the stage of the analytical process also influences the interpretive act of coding. In doing this the researcher maintained a reflexive diary during the data analysis process to ensure reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Saldana 2016), as well as, completing one final deductive round of coding. Limitations to this study were the small sample size used, moving forward a larger scale sequential mixed method style study may bring greater insights and greater generality to the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

MEANINGFUL LEARNING OCCURS THROUGH MODELLING AND INCREASING ROLES OF RESPONSIBILITY

In line with findings from Billet (2000) and Sibson (2003) that workplace mentors are of importance to learning at work, modelling from co-workers was the most common method of learning within the workplace.

I look at people the whole time I watch and look at the way people handle situations and I absorb it and I do use it I'm not gonna lie I'm starting to use the techniques and ways of other people because like I said I didn't have much experience and you don't know everything in life you learn every day so I've kinda taken up stuff' (Group 3 Participant 1)

I have a one to one with one of the girls there sometimes it's with her or sometimes I'm with one of the fellas who puts the furniture together or he explains things to me as well so I'm learning from him as well (Group 2 Participant 1)

Adeline Yuen Sze Goh (2014) found that participating in legitimate peripheral participation, starting with peripheral tasks and moving towards the completion of central tasks with more responsibility resulted in positive learning. Participants in this study also spoke of being trusted with responsibility and the importance of this in building their confidence and their learning:

You're given more responsibility and that can be a good thing (Group 1 Participant 3)

They've shown me everything now, all I have left to learn is a Z read, which is great, I like to keep busy, being trained into the tills is great cause if I have nothing to do I can jump in and help out there (Group 2 Participant 2)

Learning through responsibility in work was highly rated in the community development sample which concurs with observations made by the researcher:

very supportive workplace with rich opportunities to learn and be given responsibility appears to be a common theme with community development students (Researcher Reflective Diary Excerpt)

they let you find your own steps which I think is right because if they wrap you up in cotton wool you're never going to survive, and you'll only be vulnerable to everything (Group 3 Participant 2)

I wanted to be given responsibility, I wanted to learn, I was ready to work and learn (Group 3 Participant 3)

It would appear, that supportive relationships with co-workers coincides with learning through modelling in the workplace. This is concurrent with conclusions made by Levett-Jones *et al.* (2009) on the importance of staff making students on work placement feel welcome and their role as students validated in order for the experience to be meaningful and for progressive learning to occur. It also validates claims made by Billet (2000) and Sibson (2003) on the value of learning mentors in the work placement setting.

LEARNING CONSISTS OF BOTH SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

It appears across all samples, that the practical teaching and learning strategies implemented in the classroom generate meaningful learning, discussions, problem-based learning, presentations, and role plays are the methods of prominence showing in the data. With disdain evident towards some of the pre-prescribed, formal assessment procedures currently used in the Further Education and Training Sector.

I thought ... the work diaries, not alone did I not think they were really worth it because the marks that were given for them were quite low and it wasn't really worth the paperwork to be quite honest, to be blunt (Group 2 Participant 3)

the communications I hated, I thought it was a bit ... OTT ... posters being made, it seemed to be very childish (Group 1 Participant 3)

'The school work I'm not too sure how I feel about it, I like coming into the classes and the people are good and the interaction there is good some of the work sometimes though I don't know, some of it relevant some of its not (Group 2 Participant 2)

Contrarily, students in the discipline of group 1 included in this study generally felt there was more relevance between the theory studied in class, assessments and the transferability to the workplace:

the globalization really until you get into it, when I first saw it I hadn't a clue, but when you got into it you do understand why you have to look it, there was valid points in Finland and Sweden and their whole education structure we should model off it (Group 1 Participant 1)

Students in group 2 showed a positive response to practical learning and assessment methods used in the classroom, showing increased confidence:

I felt that because the other students took their turns at doing it (presentation) in front of the rest of us, when I had to do it myself it broke the ice a lot and brought me out of my shell (Group 2 Participant 3)

'most beneficial is the role play stuff, if you have problem what do you do is very helpful, procedural things (Group 2 Participant 2)

Aarkrog (2006) argues that learning in the workplace cannot be simulated in the classroom and tasks such as role plays do not adequately meet the function they are required for, however, findings in this study show differently. From the findings displayed there is a clear link between practical tasks such as role plays, giving class presentations and a general increase in student confidence and self-efficacy. In conclusion to this finding one may argue that linking classroom learning to the development of soft skills may evoke the lack of linkage between the classroom and work-based learning described by Burke *et al* 2009.

CONCLUSION

In the exploration of the learners' perspective of the impact of work-based learning on their skill development and learning, it appears that students feel their needs are met in relation to skill development when certain support structures are in place. Students need to feel that they belong within their work experience company. This sense of belonging is needed for positive learning and skill development to occur. They need to feel that their role as a student in the workplace is validated. This validation occurs through work placements taking on a mentoring style role providing opportunities for learning through modelling. Strategically increasing student responsibility in the workplace in a phased approach with the support of the work-based learning teacher is key to providing a supported, rich learning environment within the workplace.

In the exploration of the classroom experience of the learner, it appears that the preparation for work is made meaningful through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and opportunities to apply knowledge practically in the classroom, through activities like role play, presentations and discussions. It appears that implementing these practices appear to have the most impact on student learning and development, bringing theory to life. In turn, nurturing the development of soft skills, student confidence and self-efficacy.

For work-based learning programmes to meet the needs of the learner engaging in them, it is essential that support structures are in place. The support structures that this study shows to have significant impact on learners are: A combination of theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition is needed within the classroom to provide meaningful preparation for work; Positive mentorships within the work experience and increasing roles of responsibility to encourage learning and skill development within the work place. Planning work-based learning programmes that incorporate these elements may lead to meaningful learner experiences, high learner retention rates. Further, in line with the policy agenda for the FET sector, may lead to successful transition to employment upon completion of the work-based learning programme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have become a reality without the support of those around me, whom I would like to extend a sincerest thanks to. My supervisor, Des. I am beyond grateful for his support and encouragement. My critical friends and colleagues, for encouraging me and helping me problem solve. Thank you to the participants, without your contribution this wouldn't have been possible. To my family and my fiancée, for your support. Lastly, to my son, Shay. I want you to know that education is empowerment, I want to inspire a love of learning in you and a drive to do whatever it is your heart desires.

REFERENCE LIST

- Aarkrog, V. (2006) 'Learning in the workplace and the significance of school-based education: a study of learning in a Danish vocational education and training programme', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, available: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02601370500056268>.
- Billett, S. (2000) 'Guided learning at work', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 12(7), 272–285, available: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/10.1108/13665620010353351>.
- Boud, D and Solomon, N. (2001) *Work-based learning: a new higher education?* McGraw-Hill Education, UK.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) 'Outline of a Theory of Practice', *Cambridge studies in social anthropology*, 16(16), 248, available: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/description/cam022/76011073.html>.
- Burke, L., Marks-Maran, D.J., Ooms, A., Webb, M., Cooper, D. (2009) 'Towards a pedagogy of work-based learning: Perceptions of work-based learning in foundation degrees', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 61(1), 15–33.
- Carcary, M. (2009) 'The research audit trail-enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry', *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 7(1), 11–24, available: <http://www.ejbrm.com/issue/download.html?idArticle=198>.
- Coles, A. and McGrath, J. (2010) *Your education research project handbook*. London: Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J.W. (2014) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.
- European Parliament (2015) *Active Inclusion: Stocktaking of the Council Recommendation (2008)*, available: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/569971/IPOL_STU\(2015\)5_69971_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/569971/IPOL_STU(2015)5_69971_EN.pdf).
- Fereday, J., Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006) 'Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92, available: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/160940690600500107>.
- Flik, U. (2004) 'Triangulation in Qualitative Research', *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, 20, 432.
- Grummell, B. (2007) 'The "second chance" myth: Equality of opportunity in Irish adult education policies', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 55(2), 182–201.
- Lave, J., Wenger, E. (1991) 'Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation', *Learning in doing*, 95, 138, available: <http://books.google.com/books?id=CAVIOrW3vYAC&pgis=1>.
- Levett-Jones, T., Lathlean, J., Higgins, I., McMillan, M. (2009) 'Staff - Student relationships and their impact on nursing students' belongingness and learning', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 65(2), 316–324.
- Moon, J. a (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* [online], Theory and Practice, available: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Handbook-Reflective-Experiential-Learning-ebook/dp/B000OT8BMQ>
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*, 3rd ed., Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE, 261-283.
- Saldana, J. (2016) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed., London: SAGE
- Sibson, L. and Machen, I. (2003) Practice nurses as mentors for student nurses: An untapped educational resource?. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 3(3), 144-154.
- Teddle, ., Yu, F. (2007) 'Mixed Methods Sampling: A Typology with Examples', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 77–78, available: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1558689806292430>.
- Vincent, C. (1993) 'Education for the Community?', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 41(4), 366, available: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3121959?origin=crossref>.
- Yuen Sze Goh, A. (2014) Insights from a Bourdieusian lens: The relationship between college-based and workplace learning in becoming a vocational-technical education teacher in Brunei. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 26(1), 22-38.