Programmes That Work for People Who Work: A Process-based Model for Part-time Management Studies

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Summary

This case study describes an innovative programme designed to attract workers in the North-East of England to part-time study in Business and Management. Key features of the programme are:

- It is almost entirely work-based, thus time constraints on students are minimised and learning is strengthened by meaningful contextualisation
- The programme is process-driven, and this has meant a new approach to course design that has acted as a valuable staff development opportunity as an 'added extra'.
- By making use of the workplace as the main location of learning, students are able to complete their degree in three years instead of the usual four-and-a-half
- The traditional modular structure adopted Business School programmes has been abandoned in this case, and the BA Applied Management is structured instead around three' themes' of Management, Self-development, and Business. Teaching and assessment is integrative across these themes.

Introduction of this programme in 2003 resulted in a significant increase in applications for part-time study. The first cohort was subjected to a detailed evaluation by an external consultant, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Student performance exceeded that of any previous cohorts on the more 'traditional' part-time routes.

A key factor in the success of the programme is considered to be the structured use of learning sets and student 'buddying', which allows the sharing of experience. Reflection plays an important role in the learning process, driven by a personal development planning theme that accounts for one third of the credits at each level.

This paper covers the research that led to this initiative, and discusses the structure and delivery of the programme. Findings from the detailed evaluation of the first cohort are presented, and some of the practical issues and problems encountered during the introduction of this programme are discussed.

Objectives

The programme’s approach reflects the strong commitment in the University to the concepts of increasing access, widening participation and lifelong learning. The philosophy of the programme is to create an HE opportunity which is considered to be relevant and appealing to both students and their employers, *the priority being to make a strong linkage between learning and development and the workplace.*

The teaching and learning approaches adopted aim to create a strong self-managing learning community which provides an interesting and stimulating environment for both students and tutors, and the applied nature of the programme assessment aims to improve management behaviour and practice as well as provide a practical and focussed education, which can help grow and retain business talent in the region.

Context and rationale

The University of Sunderland is located on the coast of the North-East of England. This was traditionally an area of heavy industry, predominantly ship-building and coal-mining, but over recent decades there has been a relatively rapid decline in these industries leading to high levels of unemployment. Indeed the new campus of the University itself is built on the site of the demolished shipyards in Sunderland. Encouraging the local population to 'reskill' and engage in learning is high on the regional agenda, and the University of Sunderland has done more than most to bring Higher Education to people who were previously excluded. More than a quarter of our students are from areas with little track record in HE, and around 40% are from the lowest social classes. The university has set up a fund to provide access scholarships, and has initiatives for improving take-up of HE. It also maintains close contacts with the community, thus helping to dissipate some of the 'mystery' of university that can sometimes act as a barrier to participation, and this also ensures that students are able to keep in close contact with the real world. However, it is the strong vocational nature of the Sunderland provision that is perhaps the biggest factor in encouraging more people to participate, and in gaining the support of local business.

The Business School in particular provides largely work-related programmes with a strong emphasis on employability. Over recent years much effort has been expended on strengthening the provision to make it more valuable to both employers and potential students who may otherwise not consider taking a course in HE. However, one area where the Business School had not been so successful has been in attracting those in full-time employment, but without qualifications, to study part-time. The School had offered part-time courses in Business for many years. However, this provision was largely a 'watered down' version of the full-time programme. Part-time students did the same core modules as the full-timers, but for timetabling reasons were offered fewer options. The teaching and assessment approaches were the same as for full-time, and did nothing to recognise that, by and large, the part-time students were less of a blank canvas than the full-timers, and had their own knowledge and experience to contribute to a programme of learning.

Retention rates were poor (on one occasion we lost 35% of students in the first semester), and feedback from those that completed was as one might expect from a programme that neglected their specific needs.

Intake to the full range of part-time Business School courses had been around 50 students each year, despite the fact that only 25% of employees in the area are known to have higher-level qualifications (Rowell 2002). Attracting people to part-time study is one of the key objectives in the University strategy, so clearly this situation had to be improved. To that end, a detailed review of part-time provision was undertaken to identify current students' perceptions of their experience and to try to establish why others were not attracted to the courses.

During the 2000/2001 academic year feedback was gathered from final year students to form the basis of a report to management on the state of part-time provision in the School. Feedback was obtained using the nominal group technique. With this technique, students are asked to individually write down what they consider to be the three worst things about the programme, and then the three best things. The facilitator then collates the findings from the whole class, eliminating any duplication or ambiguities. Students are then allowed to award 10 points to their preferred items on the collated class list in any way they wish (so they may award all ten points to one item, or, at the other extreme, award one point to ten items). Results from the whole group are totalled. In this way, the items most important to the group as a whole can be identified, and the scoring gives an indication of how strongly students feel about particular items.

Findings indicated that key concerns were poor lecturing standards, the inability of academic staff to adapt style to suit part-timers, poor organisation and communication, and a system that failed to take sufficient account of the requirements of part-time students. The intrinsic reward of academic achievement featured as the strongest positive point. The top 80% of comments obtained from a nominal group session from which this feedback was obtained are shown in the following tables :

Table 1. Nominal group items (negative issues), arranged in descending order of points allocated

Students' opinions of WORST things about the programme		
COMMENT	**% Score**	**Cumulative**
Poor lecturing standards	11.8	11.8
Lack of books in library	9.4	21.2
Some lecturers unable to adapt style/manner to suit PT students	6.8	28
Inconsistent marking	6.5	34.5
Group assignments	6.5	41
Opening times during holidays	5.3	46.3
The lecturing is not what PT students require - it needs to be more focussed	5.3	51.6
Organisation is generally poor	4.7	56.3
Over assessment	3.5	59.8
Lack of consideration for the constraints of PT students	3.5	63.3
Too much wasted time & breaks	3.5	66.8
Too much generalisation in subjects - not enough specialisation	3.5	70.3
Inconsistent standards expected from lecturers	3.5	73.8
Assignment deadlines not suitable for PT - can't get in from work during the day	2.9	76.7
Reception service not good	2.9	79.6
TCAs organised at inappropriate times	2.9	82.5

Table 2. Nominal group items (positive issues), arranged in descending order of points allocated

Part-time students' opinions of BEST things about the programme		
COMMENT	**% Score**	**Cumulative**
Gaining a sense of achievement when assignments are complete	13.5	13.5
Lecturers who gear sessions towards helping with assessment	9.5	23
Library staff helpful	8.8	31.8
Help given for assignments & TCAs	8.1	39.9
Some lecturers very good (though in minority)	7.4	47.3
Being with other students	6.8	54.1
Helpful lecture guides and notes	5.4	59.5
Weekend access available	4.7	64.2
Library facilities	4.7	68.9
Awareness that education betters performance in the workplace	4	72.9
New pricing structure	3.4	76.3
Parking for match days	3.4	79.7
Learning	2.7	82.4

Overall, the key theme that came out of this review was that part-time students were taught in much the same way as full-timers, and they felt that this was not appropriate. It emerged that this was the main source of the perception that lecturing standards were poor. They were keen to have more opportunity to relate their learning to their jobs, and indeed to have their existing knowledge and experience valued in the context of their university course.

These findings echo research done in other institutions. For example,in a published study by Yorke (1999) 328 part-time students were asked to indicate the influences on their decision to withdraw from their programme. Thirty-nine factors were summarised from the survey results, which were then subjected to principal component analysis. Results of this analysis are shown in the table below

Table 3. Reasons for withdrawal of part-time students from programme of study

Factor no.	% variance	Label
1	17.3	Poor quality of the teaching experience
2	8.1	Pressure of work (academic and employment)
3	7.3	Unhappiness with the extra-institutional environment
4	5.6	Problems with relationships and finance
5	4.9	Dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision
6	4.6	Wrong choice of programme

Clearly, something needed to be done about the teaching and learning experience offered to part-time students to improve satisfaction levels and improve retention.

The other aspect that we needed to consider was how to further *expand* our part-time numbers - i.e. what needed to be done to attract those who currently chose *not* to come to study with us? Although difficult to establish from the individuals themselves, employers and other agencies provided clues as to what the problem was. Two comments that were made to us perhaps best illustrate the main issue. The first came from the training manager of a major organisation who was interested in developing an in-house staff development programme with us. He described the 'target audience' thus:

'These guys are sharp. They can work out a deal in their heads quicker than our trained accountants can. Some of them are on close to one hundred grand a year - but none of them have formal qualifications. They are the guys who spent all their years at school looking out of the window because the teachers bored them. If you come in here and just lecture to them and get them to write loads of reports and essays, they'll switch off'

The second quote came from a regional Council representative, who had attended an open evening to see what we could offer his local community to encourage them back into education. He said:

'The image is wrong. They think of lecturers and University as being snobby, that you'll look down on them. You need to do something sexy to change that'

It seemed clear to us from such comments that if we were really to achieve our aims, we needed to provide quite a different offering to part-timers. So, towards the end of 2002 a small group of us set about developing a course *designed specifically* for part-time students who were in full-time employment. The result was the BA Applied Management.

Description

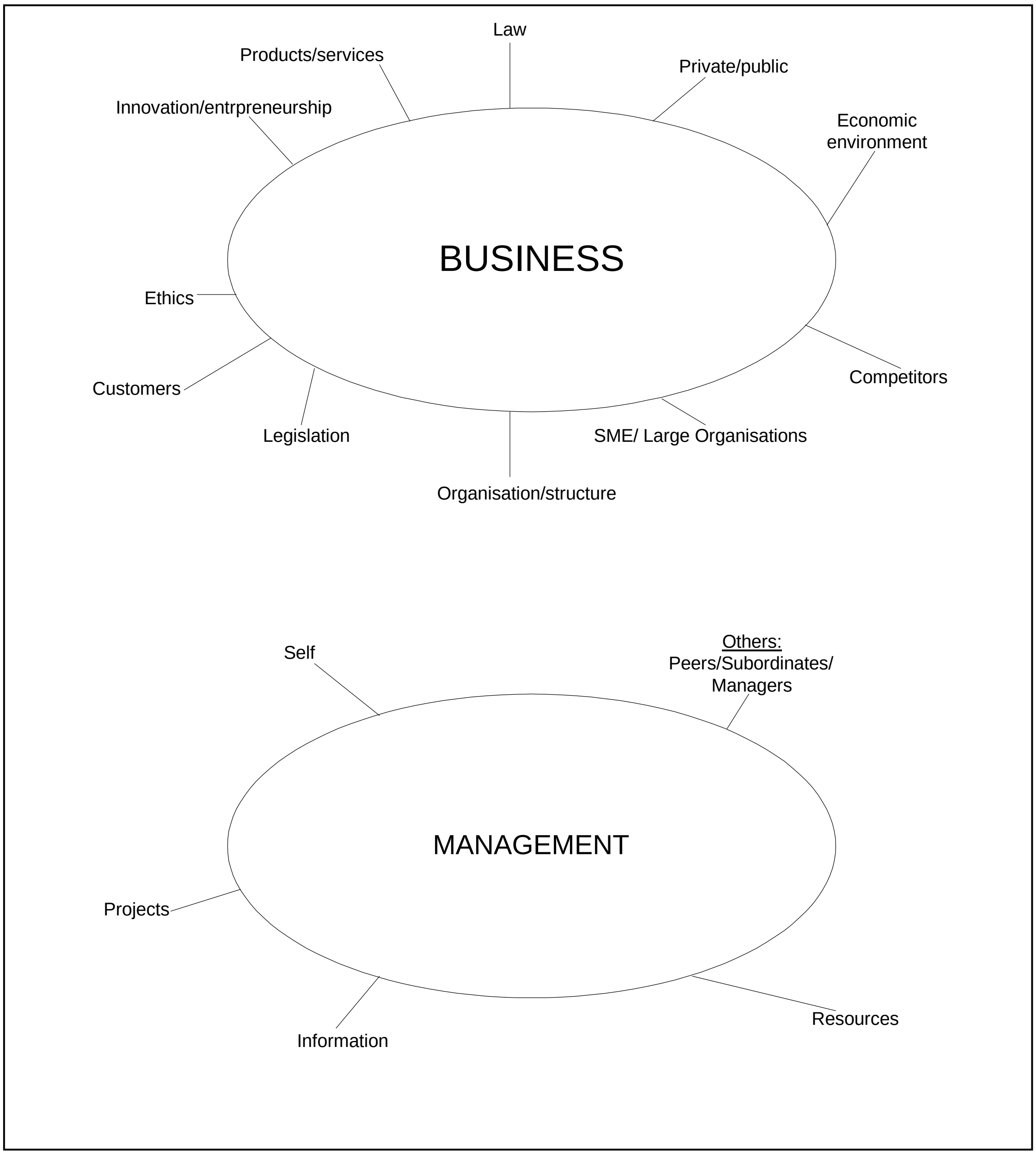
Programme structure

During a brainstorming session the ideas for a new part-time in-house course were born, drawing much from the experience we already had with company-based programmes. Initially we had a false start….looking at the modules that we already had and seeing how we could put them together to form this new programme. Having realised that we were simply repeating the same mistakes again, we agreed to start with a blank sheet of paper and decide what we wanted the students to 'look like' when they graduated from the programme, whist trying to avoid all of the problems of the traditional provision. Working backwards from there, the structure of our new course started to emerge.

The new programme is structured around three 'themes': *Business*, *Management* and *Self*, which each contribute 40 credits at each level of study. This is shown diagrammatically in Appendix 1 to this paper.

Management is the key focus of this programme and contributes 80 credits to each level of study, with 'management of self' focussed in the '*Self*' theme, and 'management of others' and 'management of resources' contained in the '*Management*' theme. However, the 'Self' theme forms the capstone subject for the programme, and integration and reflection on the other themes periodically takes place within 'self'. 'Self' comprises the Personal Development Planning 1, 2 & 3 modules, each at 40 credits.

Modules within the Business and Management themes have been developed to satisfy the requirements of the QAA General Business & Management benchmark statements. There is some overlap between 'business' and 'management' as subjects, but the following model helps to clarify content under each of these themes:



The QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications guided the learning outcomes for each theme at each level. However, the development team felt that in this type of work-based programme it is also appropriate to encourage learners' development through the levels by escalating and expanding the students' outlook within their organisations and outside. Thus, the focus at each level can be explained in these terms:

Level 1 Student focus on their own self-development and self-management and are required to contextualise their learning within their own organisation

Level 2 Whilst continuing their own self-development, students also study the management of others and of resources within a wider business

	environment, contextualising their learning both within their own organisation and other, contrasting, organisations.
Level 3	At this level students are required to shift their focus from tactical to strategic, looking at the management of businesses as whole entities within the wider business environment. Self development continues, but this too develops a more strategic focus, and students are encouraged to plan for their future careers and study.

Teaching, learning, assessment and programme delivery

We were keen to provide a programme that would have high workplace impact. To that end, the programme focuses on process much more than content and is outcome-based. The guiding principle for the programme is that the learning experience is designed to create graduates who are aware that there is a body of knowledge and theory about management in business, and know how to locate and apply theory as appropriate to improve their performance as managers in varied situations throughout their careers. Implicit in this is that graduates will also be aware that knowledge is dynamic, and they will therefore appreciate the need for continued learning and have the skills to continue their learning process independently after graduation.

This moved us away from the traditional discipline-based approach to course design, where subject content often takes precedence over the learning process. Modules take on an integrated nature to try to mimic the 'real world' as much as possible, and because their learning experience is predominantly within the workplace, our students can see the relevance of their learning and consolidate it much more effectively than can those studying by the traditional route. For much of the programme students worked together in learning sets, comprising individuals from as wide a range of organisational types as possible. This provides them with the opportunity to discuss different perspectives and share experience and views.

Summative assessment takes place only at the end of each year, and the main emphasis throughout the year is on formative work and feedback (though this is formally managed through both a learning log and a reflective task log, both of which contribute towards a student's final grade). Thus, we provide students with the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and to develop their understanding from feedback without the fear of being formally marked for everything they produce. Our focus is on the 'exit velocity' of our students, NOT how well they can write a report six weeks into the programme. We believe that this is a more realistic approach that better supports students attracted through widening participation routes.

Business and Management themes

Programme delivery takes place in formal workshop sessions on one day per month These sessions currently run on Saturday, but alternative provision may need to be made to accommodate multiple cohorts. Students are required to prepare for these sessions by a mix of completing work-based tasks, doing reading and research, reviewing lectures provided electronically, and by completing exercises on WebCT. By ensuring that students are suitably prepared, best use can be made of contact time with tutors to discuss, reflect, share and expand on learning. We anticipated that at level one students would not have the appropriate skills to complete detailed preparation before workshops, so this process starts slowly and escalates as students progress through the course.

By using this model, learning hours for each module comprises time spent on:

- Weekend input
- Development of PDP & learning log
- Review of lectures
- Assessment preparation (formative & summative)
- WebCT work
- Private reading

During development the programme team devoted some time to discussing how to ensure comparability of learning experience for students working in very different organisations (for example, SMEs vs large organisations; public vs private sector). There was concern that some students would have much more scope than others for finding appropriate projects to help them contextualise their learning and complete assessment tasks, and that some would get insufficient support from their management. Solutions proposed were:

1. Institute a formal 'pairing' system for students from different types of organisation, which we have termed 'buddying'.
2. Require students to arrange visits to their own organisations for others in their learning set.
3. Invite high-profile guest speakers from business, commerce and academia.

These features are particularly important for levels 2 & 3 when students are required to extend their learning beyond their own organisations.

Personal development theme

Whilst the Business and Management themes provide the academic context for this programme, it is the 'Self' theme embodied in the Personal Development Planning modules at each level that provides the 'capstone' to the programme. We think that success of this theme is crucial to meeting the programme’s aims. The tutor/student relationship is fundamental to this success, since it is through this relationship that reflection, deep learning, and independent learning skills will be developed. Important to the success of the theme are the following points:

- The programme is 'front-loaded' with 'learning to learn' skills, including specific learning tasks
- Staff involved as tutors for PDP **must** engage in training before taking on the role
- No tutor has more than five tutees
- Self and peer assessment form part of the learning process to develop independence
- Staff who clearly do not 'buy in' to the ethos of this programme are not included in the programme team
- Some effort is needed to encourage and support students who feel uncomfortable with the reflective process
- The role name given to tutors is important to the definition of the staff/student relationship. 'Tutor' and 'Supervisor' are inappropriate as they seem to imply a hierarchical relationship, but the term 'coach' defines the equal relationship that is needed to encourage a suitable degree of openness.

Progression and grading issues

During development a great deal of discussion centred on whether the award should be classified or simply be pass/fail. A strong argument for pass/fail was the problem of variability in students' organisations - i.e. some students may not have as much opportunity as others to conduct strong work-based projects, and would therefore not have the same opportunity to receive a good grade. Grading might also be counter-productive in terms of promoting deep learning. However, experience shows that part-time students tend to be fiercely competitive (primarily with themselves), and prefer a grading system as it provides them with added motivation. We also felt that employers prefer to have some indication of how well students are doing, and look to grades for this purpose. The decision was therefore to classify the degree. Given the nature of the programme and the relatively small number of summative assessments, we had to draw up programme- specific regulations to describe how this would be done.

Evaluation

We started with a pilot cohort of 27 in October 2003. Very quickly a few left because either they could not adapt to the learning process, or because of difficulties at work. Those that remained (22) have been successful beyond our hopes. In particular, feedback gathered again through the nominal group technique has suggested levels of meta-learning that have never been observed on a cohort-wide basis at this level:

Table 4. Nominal group items (positive issues, new programme), arranged in descending order of points allocated

Things I have gained from doing the course	**score**	**%**	**Cumulative %**
Learning set contact	77	48%	48%
Increased understanding of organisation	19	12%	60%
Being more reflective	11	7%	67%
Understanding why changes occur	7	4%	71%
Only opportunity to do degree	7	4%	76%
Taking a more objective approach to problems	6	4%	79%

Other items that were raised by students, though they did not come out with top ratings when class scoring was completed, were nevertheless just as encouraging, and indeed unique for part-time feedback. For example, students mentioned:

> *'Improved self-belief'*
>
> *‘Being more contemplative'*
>
> *'Being able to apply learning'*
>
> *'Causing real visible improvement to my organisation'*

Employer feedback has also been impressive. Comments include:

> *'Since Nicola commenced the course her management input has exceeded all expectations’*
>
> *‘X made a presentation to our bank manager on my behalf which was very impressive, and undoubtedly above my own capabilities!’*

> *'This course has proved extremely valuable, not only to our employee, but to the future of our company'*

Student performance was similarly impressive. Of the twenty-two students completing the pilot year, five gained marks in excess of 70%

Discussion

The success of this programme in terms of students' learning outcomes has taken even the most dedicated members of the programme team by surprise, and has led us to look in much more depth into what might be happening with our group of students. The intensely reflective nature of the learning process, along with the contextualised nature of programme content, are design features that have undoubtedly played a large part.

Our inclusion of 40-credits worth of personal development planning at each level raised some eyebrows amongst (perhaps less enlightened!) colleagues, and was the source of intense scrutiny at the programme validation. However, our first year experience has proved to us the value of this formalised approach to PDP. We have seen some remarkable results. Although not popular with some students (who found intense personal reflection uncomfortable) it forced them into true reflection mode, and this even took some of the learners themselves by surprise. Perhaps the most extreme example is the case of one class member who, during her end-of-year presentation, described a tale of an abused past that had destroyed her self-esteem and made her believe that she was not capable of achieving anything worthwhile. The PDP process had somehow helped her to unlock all of this, and she explained how she felt that she could now put all of it behind her because the process had restored her self-belief.

Most intriguing is the success of the student learning sets . Our students have taken the learning set approach very seriously. Most meet regularly to discuss their work and share ideas. Often, at the end of a hard day's session at the Business School, sets will stay behind to reflect on the day together and to record their feelings and experiences for their learning logs. Feedback showed that they rated the learning set experience as the most valuable part of the learning process. This in turn started *us* reflecting on what was actually happening here, and led us back to our original feedback from the traditional part-time students, whose main complaint was that we were not valuing what they had to offer. But what exactly was that?

Few, if any, of our part-time students had formal qualifications, and many had not studied in any academic sense since leaving school. The vital 'student skills' such as using the library, referencing, report writing and so on, were absent. On the other hand, many were in management positions, and they came from a wide variety of organisations: small and large enterprises, public and private sector, service and manufacturing. In terms of business and management knowledge, they represented a pool of resource on a much greater scale and more up-to-date than the Business School itself could provide. The problem lay in the nature of the knowledge: this was largely *tacit* knowledge, and by definition, difficult to articulate and to transfer from one person to another.

The scientist turned philosopher Michael Polanyi (1966) explained the nature of such knowledge, developing a model of cognition showing knowledge as having two dimensions, the tacit and explicit. He commonly used the phrase 'we know more than we can tell' to introduce the idea of tacit knowledge. For example, we know the face of a close friend or relative, but we cannot say how we know it; we could not specify exactly its shape, colouring, or the measurement of its features. Another example that Polanyi gave is a skill. You know how to ride a bike, yet you cannot tell how you do it (Scott, 1985).

These ideas can easily be transferred to the management role; with time a manager builds a valuable stock of tacit knowledge. Eventually, with experience, a manager will know intuitively how actions or decisions will affect implementation in a range of different contexts. It has been suggested that tacit knowledge about the business environment, industry patterns, and company abilities is a resource that can provide significant competitive advantage for organisations (Kogut and Zander, 1993), because it is experientially acquired, and is, therefore, unique to each person. It therefore represents a valuable resource.

Back to our class of part-time students: if we accept the idea that tacit knowledge is an important part of a manager's ability to do their job effectively, it follows that if we can find a way to access and share the tacit knowledge of our class members then we are going some way to valuing what they have to offer, and providing a richer resource for all involved. McNett, Wallace and Athanassiou (2004) have given this problem some considerable thought; they contend that the fundamental source of our teaching challenge lies in the dual nature of knowledge that a manager needs to develop, and that tacit knowledge plays a significant, though not widely recognised role in the teaching of management (and other disciplines). They suggest a number of ways in which we can approach learning and teaching in order to tap into this valuable resource. Firstly, they suggest that the more inductive the learning, the greater the role of tacit knowledge. The normal deductive theory-to-application model applied in most management classrooms, then, does little to recognise tacit knowledge. They also suggest that the curriculum must emphasise a high level of cognitive development; students must be confronted with the complexity inherent in meta-learning, and concepts that require thinking at high levels of complexity and ambiguity: 'the security of the right answers lodged in the mind of the professor is no longer part of the classroom'.

Polanyi also provides some pointers for us; as he describes tacit knowledge, it requires intensive personal experience. The learner must be able to take new knowledge and integrate it with previous experiences and knowledge, and this is done most effectively when the learner is immersed in *action* using as many senses as possible.

Somewhat unwittingly, we seem to have tapped into the pool of tacit knowledge that our students possess and provided a vehicle for them to share that knowledge, and we have done that by designing a programme that asks our students to *do* things, that brings them into contact with as many alternative ideas as possible (mainly via the learning sets), that contextualises the learning, and is inductive in approach.

This leaves us, as academics, with a dilemma. If the strongest part of the learning experience is the acquisition of tacit knowledge by some process of sharing, reflection, or storytelling, and yet tacit knowledge, by definition, cannot be articulated, how do we measure the full extent of students' learning? Certainly, none of our traditional methods of assessment can do so. It is a dilemma we have yet to solve, but it is perhaps not so important when we realise that we are helping our students to develop. In fact, the achievement of the programme can probably be best summed up through the words of one of our students, who said:

> *'I can feel my brain grow!'*

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Appendix 1: Course structure