Conceptualising learning and teaching for the ‘new lifelong learning sector’

Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Hull in conjunction with Yorkshire & Humber East Lifelong Learning Network (YHELLN).
Conceptualising Learning and Teaching for the New Lifelong Learning Sector

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Conceptualising Learning and Teaching for the New Lifelong Learning Sector

ESCalate Research Grant: Final report October 2009

Conceptualising learning and teaching for the ‘new lifelong learning sector’

Grant Holder: Mr Andrew Holmes
University of Hull, Centre for Lifelong Learning

Aims

The project proposal identified three aims:

1 Develop a new conceptual model of learning in a business context based on a case study of successful inter-company learning (the Greater Economic Success Group, GES)

2 Identify practical lessons for developing learning and teaching strategies for employed learners at higher level (Level 4+) in the post-Leitch world.

3 Identify the learning and professional development implications for the development of HE/FE Education professionals in the new lifelong learning sector post Leitch.

This final report sets out the outcomes of the project and demonstrates the achievement of these aims.

Background to the project

This project arises from the work of the Greater Economic Success Group (GES), which was established as part of an initiative to support local economic development in North Lincolnshire. The GES is a forum bringing together North Lincolnshire Council, local businesses (large, medium and small) and the Kingsway centre (the consulting arm of North Lindsey College) to identify areas of common interest and develop collaborative action to support local economic development. The Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hull worked with the GES to develop and provide innovative learning at level 4 and above.

An evaluation of the GES was undertaken on behalf of YHELLN by Dr Richard Stakes and is available via the YHELLN website 1. This evaluation, together with continuing work by the Kingsway Centre and YHELLN, suggested that there was relevance and applicability of the GES experience. The basic model developed in this study has its inception in discussions of the GES study, the role of academics in the GES, and YHELLN support for bitesize provision (that is expert session or master classes) and staged engagement2 which took place in a number of fora, including as part of a module of the University of Hull PGCHE. This project arose out of a desire to capture the experience, learning and outcomes of engagement with the GES and disseminate them to a wider audience.

2 See, for example, YHELLN, Staged Engagement, All the Best, Good Practice Guides, YHELLN, 2009
Method

A project team was established to engage in and deliver on the work programme and undertake designated tasks within the programme. The project team was led by Andrew Holmes, Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Hull. Management of the programme was undertaken by Nick Hooper, Work Strand Manager for Research, CPD and Evaluation, Yorkshire & Humber East Lifelong Learning Network (YHELLN). Jenny Shaw, Director of YHELLN and Kath Bridger, Consultant, acted in an advisory capacity. Dr Keith McDonald, Consultant, undertook literature reviews, collected information by face-to-face and telephone interviews and wrote reports on issues identified by the project team.

Outline of the report

Following this introduction, Part 1 describes the innovative learning and teaching supporting the conceptual model. Part 2 of the report presents a conceptual model of learning and teaching for the new lifelong learning sector. This is followed in Part 3 by an examination of the implications for educational professionals. Part 4 concludes by setting out a framework for disseminating the lessons to academics working with companies, consultants and private sector organisations.

This is supported by four appendices:

a) A diagrammatic representation of the conceptual model
b) the relevance of environment to work based learning/employer engagement
c) the role of soft skills in work based learning and employer engagement
d) the relevance of language barriers to work based learning and employer engagement (funded by YHELLN)
Conceptualising Learning and Teaching for the New Lifelong Learning Sector

Part 1 Innovative Learning and Teaching

The learning and teaching developed by the Kingsway Centre and the Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Hull, with the GES represents incremental development, building on evolving good practice across the academic community. It is innovative in combining key elements into a coherent framework across traditional FE/HE boundaries and levels, making extensive use of short, bitesize provision, creating new pathways and introducing significant involvement, ownership and development by the participating companies and learners.

The University of Hull Foundation Award

A key element in the development of the learning and teaching associated with the GES Group has been the University of Hull Foundation Award, or UFA offered by the Centre for Lifelong Learning (a 60 credit University Certificate). The full UFA consists of six modules, each offering 10 credits at Level 4, so those who achieve a full award will achieve a 60 credits HE qualification (a ‘minor award’ in the national qualifications framework). Modules are available in a variety of subjects, from specific work-related topics to broader, liberal arts subjects, ITC and languages. For many adult HE returner, second chance learners and those seeking a change of career or further study UFA modules are a way into or back into HE. Some participants take a single module, whilst others complete a UFA and continue on with further study to gain an HE qualification (degree or FD).

As a part of this programme, the Centre for Lifelong Learning has developed UFA modules to meet needs identified by the GES Group. One example is the study route Professional Award in Continuous Business Improvement (PACBI) – series of thematically linked modules in lean improvement processes; designed to improve manufacturing businesses efficiency and specific learner skills and knowledge. This includes ten credit modules such as: lean thinking, leading and managing world class organisations and problem solving. All learners engage in a work-based project as the final module. The programme has been delivered both on-site within different companies in the North and North East Lincolnshire region by academics from the Kingsway Centre and at the Kingsway centre itself.

Associated with this is a 120 credit Certificate in Continuous Business Improvement (aka the ‘lean leader’ programme) with six modules offering 20 credits each, with each module lasting around three months. The programme was developed in conjunction with the regional arm of a multinational manufacturing company. Its aim was to develop their team leaders’ critical and reflective thinking capabilities, their ability to evaluate theories and concepts and apply these as new ideas in the workplace, to work together as a cohesive team on the implementation of lean manufacturing improvement practices and to present themselves as professional influential managers in the organisation. The company sought to equip the learners, all middle-managers, with the necessary knowledge and skills to lead the use of lean manufacturing techniques in the workplace. The programme has been delivered on-site within the multi-national manufacturing company primarily by a member of the company’s training department in conjunction with an academic from the University’s Centre for Lifelong Learning. The learning has been supported by the use of Pebblepad, an online portfolio tool which aggregates records of learning and achievement into e-portfolios and

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3 This section draws on A Good Practice Guide written for YHELLN by Don Knibb
enables students to reflect on their development. Successful completion of the programme enables participants to progress onto a business leadership management programme.

Learners completing the 60 credit UFA PACBI can use this as direct APL entry to the 120 credit Certificate in Continuous Business Improvement.

**Bitesize Courses**

The idea of gradual or staged engagement with HE, identified through the experience from the UFA, has been extended through the development of expert session or master classes. Typically, these are two and a half hour taught sessions arranged in a series of 8 or 10 non accredited sessions or accredited provision facilitated by an academic or business expert. Participants choose one or more sessions to attend and may then go on to enrol on a UFA module and potentially progress through a series of stages to a degree of FD.

Colleges within the University of Hull’s Federation of Colleges adopted this model, with the support of the University of Hull Centre for Lifelong Learning and the Yorkshire & Humber Lifelong Learning Network (YHELLN) to overcome the HEFCE regulations which prevented them from offering sub-degree higher education other than Foundation degrees. HEFCE approved a model whereby the University of Hull managed a number of bitesize courses based in Colleges. Under this model, the university’s role centrally was one of quality assurance, accreditation and student certification.

**Flexible modules**

The UFA modules developed in partnership with the GES Group include a module ‘Managing personal and professional development’. This is a framework module, effectively having the structure of a module but not specifying the content. Students agree with their course leader the topic that they will study and how they will apply it in their workplace and assess the experience. To gain credit for the module students add an agreed information element, which may be past or concurrent learning, or a mixture of the two. Concurrent learning may come from lectures, CPD sessions, company training programmes or other agreed sources. The learning is placed in the context of the academic literature and presented as a portfolio. Students who meet the agreed learning outcomes achieve credit for the module. The ‘Managing personal and professional development’ module is also present, at 20 credits, within the Certificate in Continuous Business Improvement.

This approach offers flexibility within a module, extending the flexibility within courses offered by the University of Hull’s flexible framework, by which modules from different programmes of study can potentially be combined into a qualification. To a much larger extent than in traditional HE programmes it allows the content to be determined by the learners, guided by their employer and academic course leader, greatly increasing flexibility of provision without requiring each change to go through an approval process, thus increasing speed of response. Individual modules are approved on the basis of their learning outcomes and assessment methodology, not their content. This allows much greater flexibility within the curriculum and lecturers to be able to flex the content to suit learner needs. It has the
additional advantage for work-place learning of allowing past and concurrent learning to be accredited by the same route, and indeed in the same module.

The role of employers in provision

The development of the GES group and its evolving relationship with the Kingsway Centre and the Centre for Lifelong Learning has changed the role of employers in the provision of HE. In the early stages of the GES, employers were selecting courses from a menu offered by the University and its FE partners, including the Kingsway Centre. As the needs of the business community became better understood through the activities and relationships nurtured by the GES, all parties questioned the content of the courses offered, and the delivery methods. Gradually, the involvement of the business community increased. In particular, the contribution of businesses to determining the content, not just of courses but also within individual modules, increased. At the same time, responsibility for the delivery of content evolved to include people from within the businesses who had the knowledge and experience.

Benefits

1. Staged engagement allows learners to ‘try’ HE without a long term and expensive commitment
2. The bitesize programme allows HE and FE providers to offer short courses of 10 credits or more in a progression framework
3. Learning at HE level requires critical reflection, which proves beneficial in learning and in being able to apply the learning in the workplace.
4. The GES approach is flexible to meet the needs of employers and employees; courses reflect local needs
5. The university gains valuable experience and benefit from a successful example of flexibility and rapid response to an identified local need
6. The value of formal accreditation and the benefit of close relationships with academia have been demonstrated to the local business community
Part 2 A Conceptual Model of Learning in a Business Context

Dr Keith McDonald

1. Rationale

1.1. This model is based in part on an evaluation of the Greater Economic Success (GES) initiative commissioned by the Yorkshire and Humber East Life Long Learning Network (YHELLN). Following on from the GES evaluation, research has been conducted into key findings with the goal of developing a conceptual model (see appendix B & C).

1.2. This document will begin by placing the GES initiative into context in order to illuminate what follows.

1.3. A wider context will then be considered.

1.4. There will then be a summary of some of the key elements identified from the extended research activity emerging from the GES evaluation.

1.5. The conceptual model of learning in a business context will follow.

2. GES

The GES group is based in North Lincolnshire and has been active for over five years. The group is a ‘knowledge exchange’ group and seeks to develop the business needs of participants in order to enhance the local economy.

The GES is a partnership between four key member groups within the local authority made up of:

- local private businesses
- the economic development team from the local authority
- a local post-compulsory education and training provider
- a university

The success of the group is described as follows by Richard Stakes, the author of the evaluation:

‘Within the United Kingdom [UK] this is an unusual alliance, which has recently been described as an example of outstanding practice in college/industrial links [OFSTED 2007] as well as an example of good practice as a result of the levels of retention and ‘returnability’ of local firms to the college. In this
context the GES can be regarded as helping to meet the local needs set out in the national policy on lifelong learning by having an impact on both the employability and social empowerment of people, as well as helping to ensure that local businesses have the skilled workforce to remain competitive and successful'. (4)

The data forming the evaluation was collected from interviews conducted with small focus groups made up of the above mentioned five participatory elements. The full report can be found in the appendices of this document.

3. Some Context

In a highly useful discussion partnership working and WBL, Reeve and Gallacher point out that partnership working is an often problematic endeavor which has ‘not been fully recognized or addressed.’(219) Citing a successful model, they identify a sophisticated and flexible partnership model which ‘denotes not only full involvement, but a degree of integration between the partners, an integration aimed at promoting organizational objectives.’ (220) They also identify several factors which influence the proposed model which follows.

a) Many see partnership at the heart of work based learning and when successful this is an ongoing relationship between the university and employers.

b) Time is needed to establish and develop these relationships.

c) Work based learning needs to acknowledge and validate knowledge which has currency in the work base and be prepared to move away from received academic conventions.

d) Validation is a problematic issue and programmes which seek to challenge established systems often run into difficulty when University QA procedures are encountered. An example is the possibility of a course running at a number of different levels and learners engaging with the same material at different levels.

e) The panels which approve learning contracts give key roles and power positions to academics, which in itself is contradictory to the notion of versatile partnerships.

4. Extended Research
4.1. Following on from the GES evaluation, research was conducted into key aspects identified as contributory factors in the successes of the project. These can be broken down into five main elements.

4.2. Environment

4.3. One of the contributory factors to come out of the GES evaluation was the use of the Kingsway Centre as a venue for the GES meetings as well as the fact that some participants visited one another’s workplaces as part of their practice.

The relatively autonomous nature of the Kingsway Centre may well provide a suitable forum for the group to meet for a number of reasons. For example:

1) The space is relatively neutral and not housed within one of the facilities of the member organisations.
2) In addition, the centre is not situated in an ‘out and out’ educational environment (such as an FE or HEI campus setting).
3) The Kingsway Centre is very much a business environment, a facility designed and tailored for the culture of business exchange and meeting as opposed to the ‘traditional’ education setting of, for instance, the classroom or seminar space.
4) In addition, members of the group also visited the workplaces of other members on a rotational basis in order to experience the setting in which others conduct their day to day enterprises.

The research into environment in work place learning contexts can be summarized as follows.

a. **The workplace and the agency of the employee within it is a key factor.** If an employee is disenfranchised from the work they undertake and as follows the place of work, then work based learning is fundamentally destabilised and its goals are limited. In fact, giving the employee the influence and discretion to undertake training and education with a level of autonomy outside of the workplace and with the employer’s full support may illustrate an engagement and commitment for all involved. What seems to be evident from the success of the GES model is the agency which the stakeholders exhibit and the ability of the participants to meet in a slick, functional and bespoke environment is surely a part
of this success. This highlights the notion of ‘high involvement’ and ‘low involvement’ environments and the ways in which this affects the agency of employees in WBL ventures. Some point to the fact that small company scenarios are more likely to result in ‘high involvement’ scenarios where workers feel empowered and more involved in WBL opportunities. It is worth, then, taking into account and incorporating the subject position of the learner into the programme of study and acknowledging that experience of agency in learning varies dramatically. There is a significant body of research and publication on this matter as outlined in appendix B and this model seeks to privilege this as a core value.

b. **The subject position of the learner in relation to previous education is also a factor.** For example, those without prior experience of the University environment may feel alienated or at least apprehensive about attending at a traditional campus environment on a WBL basis. Others have also pointed out a practical disparity between the WBL experience and the HE experience in terms of access to facilities and support.

c. **The ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’ nature of the WBL practice is relevant.** Expansive learning environments are flexible, organic and seek to empower employees with multiple and ongoing knowledge expansions whereas restrictive environments are reductive hierarchical and led by short term goals. A conformist management culture will seek to regulate and situate WBL within spatial boundaries in order to monitor, calculate and compartmentalise the learning process. This could include on-site ‘classes’ which are held under the watchful eye of the management or HEI held courses where staff are ‘released’ for a period of time into the arms of the experts. This is at odds with expansive learning models.

5. **Soft Skills**

5.1. **An overwhelming response to the group’s successes from GES respondents related to attitude, communication and flexibility as a core philosophy of the group.** Soft skills being regarded as a wide skill set required by employees, including: time management, communication skills (oral, listening and a range of written skills), and self organisation. In communication skills we can include using communication ‘appropriately’ in different workplace situations and contexts. This may include for example: body language, empathy,
volume, pace and tone of oral communication. This soft skills approach was highly valued by
participants and was viewed as a bedrock element which allowed the group to successfully
function and evolve. One member of the university went so far as to suggest a narrative
model (a cooperative learning domain) based upon the integration of soft skills into practice
(see figure 1).

5.2. Expansive environments recognise soft skills as an educational asset. An expansive
approach promotes a philosophy of participation which values an array of soft skills and a
dialogue among invested participants. This can lead to a valuable sense of ownership and
investment from those involved based upon openness and mutual respect. This environment
also opens the door to situated learning, where a participant’s biography, needs and
attributes are met through an enhanced attitude to competency and competency
acquirement.

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**Knowledge Transfer Layer:** At this stage, an effort will be made to both broaden the group’s activities and also actively recruit membership across a wide range of local businesses.

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**Mutual Trust Layer:** This level is identified by the degree of mutual trust and understanding within the group, where it is working together freely for both the individual and common benefit.

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**Education and Training Layer:** Here, coaching takes place between experienced and new members. Meaningful ideas are exchanged. Formal education takes place validated by the university.

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**Introductory Layer:** During which the membership made initial contacts and laid the foundations for further professional exchanges through a range of surface level activities.

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(Figure 1: the cooperative learning domain)
5.3. **Language use can both inhibit and enhance WBL practice.** Language competency is a key soft skill and a key part of work. Discourse communities involve interrelated occupational groups which share occupational dialects based upon shared knowledge and exchange and WBL initiatives can include those from different discourse communities collaborating. This includes academic practitioners encountering professionals, different business communities working in collaboration and inter-departmental interaction. An approach which privileges select discourses as the norm is restrictive and can disenfranchise those who are out of the loop. In contrast, a shared common language and the ability for participants to develop and engage with others in dialogue is a part of an expansive environment (see Appendix C).

5.4. **Assessment strategies are a potential problem in capturing soft competencies.** It is suggested that ingrained methods of assessment in HE cultures may not be sufficiently adequate to deal with soft skills, other than pockets of good practice, and this had led to them being largely ignored and seen as less legitimate for HE delivery. Soft skills often exist in between the cracks of traditional academic schema and if they are to be legitimised as academically valuable then new or developed methods of assessment need to be taken into account that are stringent enough to withstand scrutiny and quality assurance agendas.

### 6. A Conceptual Model of Learning in a Business Context

6.1. The following is a suggested model for learning in a business context which seeks to be adapted to a range of situations in the new lifelong learning sector. The conceptual model is drawn from the GES case study and developed from extended research outlined above and expanded in the reports which make up the appendices.

6.2. The term ‘model’ is used to describe a set of elements and the inter-relationships between them. The essence of the model is the recognition of all of the elements, the relationship between them and how they relate and interact to provide a holistic approach to lifelong learning. The elements are not sequential stages of development. Individual elements may or may not be present in programmes. This ‘pick and mix’ approach is one of the key features of the model. While not sequential, there may be benefits from linking elements to ensure that any pre-requisite provision has occurred and to provide coherent programmes for learners. A diagrammatic presentation of the model is included in Diagram 1.
Diagram I  A Conceptual model of learning in a business context

Factor A: The subject position of the learner.

Factor B: The learning environment.

Factor C: Soft Skills and language as a barrier and enabler.

Factor D: Assessment strategies and QA.

Element 1: A familiar with existing learning frameworks and pathways.

Element 2: A crossover between pathways adopting a climbing-frame approach.

Element 3: A student led approach where participation on several levels is facilitated.

Element 4: Accreditation of CPD as a part of staged engagement.

Element 5: The development of a learning hub where all participants have a significant input. Responsive to economic needs.

Element 6: Employers and learners have input into course content.

Element 7: APLE and APL are key to providing transition between pathways.

Element 8: This climbing frame approach extends upwards (Level 4+) as well as across pathways.

Element 9: A flexible individual learning strategy is planned with input from all stakeholders.

Element 10: This extends to a hub strategy based upon local needs.
6.3. The model is underpinned by several principles which seek to influence the ethos of any endeavour which comes from it. In addition, there are several contributing factors which it is suggested are taken into account.

a. Principles
The influential principles of the model are based upon the concept of the expansive learning environment originated by Evans et al (2006). The fundamental principles relevant to this model involve a flexible approach to learning which seeks to empower participants in such a manner as to create a sense of ownership over the WBL endeavour. The ethos of this approach takes into account situated learning which acknowledges the individuality of the learner and their relationship to the establishments of which they are a part. The model seeks to promote the agency of the participant in such a way that is beneficial to-
- their progression in the learning endeavour and future
- to their employer
- to the capacity of the learning provider
- to the learning group
- to the local and national economy

b. Contributory Factors
Based upon the GES case study and the research which has followed, the following factors are relevant as outlined earlier in this document and expanded upon in the appendices.

1) Environment
2) Soft Skills
3) Language
4) Situated Learning
5) Assessment
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6.1 Model

Element 1 Starting point - National Qualifications Framework

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Element 1 Starting point - National Qualifications Framework

Note that this framework is based upon both a linear topology of progression through levels with the assumption of one level achievement unlocking access to the next. In addition, there is a hierarchical system at work which pre-supposes a level of competence in association with the level achieved as a given. Note too, that this framework runs on two pathways with a relatively clear distinction between vocational and academic disciplines. Note also that it runs contradictory to traditional Adult and Lifelong Learning concepts of horizontal progression, which, because of open access recruitment policies (i.e. often no prerequisite entry criteria to a course) may teach learners at a range of different levels within the same course or cohort, respecting the learners as individuals with a range of knowledge and experience which they each bring to the learning situation – rather than as being ‘empty vessels’ to be filled with knowledge.

Element 2

We suggest a cross over between pathways that blurs the boundaries between academic and vocational pursuits. E.g. an individual with a level four qualification on a vocational pathway may endeavour to take a level two academic qualification. The focus here is on the use of the learner’s need rather the level of achievement. The learner with an existing academic or vocational qualification at a certain level will study a new topic at a different level (but will bring with them the study skills they have). For example a learner studying for a level 7 academic research degree may need to study a level 2 ITC qualification in order to be able to process their research data. They study both at the same time, at a different level. Effectively there exists a network or climbing frame approach to the framework rather than the existing ladder structure. The focus then, is on the process of a qualifications portfolio which is ongoing and which adds to the strength of the whole. This involves a long term commitment from all stakeholders which exists as a part of a culture of mentoring and nurturing. Note too an opportunity to learn from other endeavours which take an innovative approach to pathways (see for example the University of Bradford’s Stepping Stones programme http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/conted/awp/stepstones/).

Element 3
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Continuing this climbing frame model, short courses can be developed which allow transference to take place between existing pathways and levels. These can act as bridging courses aimed at easing the transition both between levels and across pathways. There is also the potential here for the development of programmes in which content is relevant on several levels. For example, a group may participate in an educational event together at different levels. This student led approach, where the training provider or academic facilitate rather than teach from an autocratic point will allow multiple level collaborative learning to take place. This also adds to the sense of non-hierarchical collaboration valued by the members of the GES group, and also fits in with some Universities Adult Education/Lifelong Learning traditions of taking the individual learner's experience as the starting point for learner engagement.

Element 4
The accreditation of CPD is a part of this ‘staged engagement’, by which people are encouraged to enter higher education, initially through a single session or a short module, leading on to further study. Here, CPD is an element of the hub activity and is used as another tool of the group rather than a separate activity. In many ways, CPD represents the third pathway of the framework alongside academic and vocational qualifications and is also a significant mode which allows this climbing frame approach to take place. Another mode here involves the accreditation of existing or developing work-place training as a part of staged engagement

Element 5
This model also encourages employer and/or learner input into the pathways and the choices of courses on the programme. This input though, comes not from one employer but from the participating member organisations. One of the bedrock concepts of this model is the fact that each group works as a learning hub. This hub is organic though and will need to adapt to industry needs which will of course change. The idea here is that the design of the hub itself is intended to be inherently flexible and able to be moulded to changing circumstances. Considering this, the employers take a major role in driving the hub and the educational providers are also ideally willing to respond to changes.

The assumptions here are as follows:
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- Participation adds to the learner’s skills and professional/personal development.
- Participation adds to the hub, the success of the individual adds to the group’s ongoing development.
- Participation adds to the employer stakeholder’s staff competencies.
- Participation adds to the employer member’s staff portfolios
- This aids productivity
- This aids the local economy
- This aids the national economy

Note that as the programme is bespoke and driven by outcomes, the likelihood of the learner achieving their end goal is heightened. In addition, as the hub is situated in a bespoke and neutral environment, the hub needs come from negotiation rather than from above in a hierarchical context.

Element 6
There is also employer and learner input into the course content. As the agency of the participants is a highly desirable factor in this model, input into the content itself is advised. This also adds to the bespoke nature of the programme in order to meet individual, employer, group and local needs. For instance, if the hub members value soft skill competency and choose to see these skills in the programme, then the learning provider is required to add such skills into the course content. The emphasis here is on dialogue. In addition, this model is ongoing, so participants’ input will develop as time goes on after reflection.

Element 7
Another key mode of transition between pathways and levels is the use of APEL and APL. This is also part of a continuous development rather than simply part of an entry route. Note, then, the mode of transition through this climbing frame or network is made up of multiple potential factors, each tailored to add to the agency of the learner (see figure 6.2) Figure 6.2 Modes of Transition.
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Element 8
This climbing frame approach recognises that learners may continue their learning by moving between levels and pathways rather than following a sequential upward route within a pathway. The 'climbing frame' can be entered at any point, traversed by one of a number of routes and left at any point. Whereas there are some existing examples of staged engagement and progression up to level four, this model also extends from level five upwards.

Element 9
It is also suggested that the employer, learner and academic map out the topics and content to be used for the accredited staged engagement and identify the existing modes of transition. Once identified and planned, a learning strategy can be developed. However, it is recommended that this strategy is not seen as a fixed contract which needs to be adhered to as a programme in itself but rather a flexible and evolving learning lifestyle.

Element 10
The model can be extended throughout the hub. Companies can collaborate to identify topics and content for accredited staged engagement for the benefit of the local group. Here, companies use each other as professional reference points for learning decisions and a local
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strategy can be developed for the benefit of the local economy. Professional academics are a vital part of this and will be a key factor in the negotiation, decision making and development of courses; however the input of the vocational experts is also validated. There is potential here to incorporate this idea into assessment and QA procedures. Traditionally, academics act as the gatekeepers of standards and judgements based upon their own expertise. It is recommended though that where possible and appropriate, vocational experts are also brought in to the assessment process on multiple platforms. The intention here is to blend together academic and vocational expertise to the mutual benefit of all involved.

An ideal result:-

The end result of this model is a flexible approach to qualifications and pathways tailored to the needs of the individual learner, group, employers and local economy. There is an emphasis on ownership by the learners and employers individually and as a group. In addition, it is important to note several things.

a) These stages are not conceived as sequential, some will be relevant to individuals, employers and groups and others not. These are meant to be bespoke in relation to the contexts affecting the group.

b) The initiative itself is meant to be continuous, long term and evolving. It takes into account the pressures of work and the fact that individuals and groups may drop in and out of the programme. Indeed, it is suggested that this is acknowledged, factored and even celebrated as a part of a shared ongoing exercise. On returning to the group, new doors are opened.

c) Although education and training are a vital part of the hub’s activities, it is not the sole reason for its existence. Other activities, collaborations and exchanges will take place which benefit the participants and this is of great value. Indeed, the multifaceted/multifunctional nature of the group is highly desirable. The outcome is the key and the academic pursuits are designed to aid the outcome.

6. Some Reflections

• As is evident, the model takes a fluid and at times alternative approach to levels. It is of course clear that the received level topology has been and remains of
significant value. However there is a debate to be had here and the whole system of levels, progression through them and their real world currency is worth delving into in further depth.

- This raises the question of QA systems, drivers and processes in an HE perspective. Many may feel that the inherent nature of this model is inherently at odds with QA and that it could be unmanageable and destabilised when tasked with QA "guarantees". The National Qualification Framework (and indeed HEFEC funding regulations such as for Equivalent and Lower Qualifications or ELQs) assumes a vertical progression by learners through the hierarchy of levels; that learners enter a programme of study at a particular level all having the same knowledge and experience and HE provides and approves courses as being at a specific level. Yet this is clearly not the case (other than arguably for 18 year olds entering a degree programme having studied the same A levels). Adult work based learners engage with the same subject material at different levels depending on their qualifications, experience and role in the workplace. A further discussion/debate/investigation into QA culture and the somewhat arbitrary concept of qualification level is, we suggest, urgently needed within higher education.

- There is also the question of funding as HEIs are funded for FTE (full time equivalent) students per year. Learners taking programmes such as the model suggests, with flexibility and horizontal progression through levels are at odds with funding systems and recent changes such as removing funding for students with a pre-existing qualification (ELQs – Equivalent and Lower Qualifications).

- Some observers may feel that these flexible, not always linear and variously accredited courses have less currency or validity than the traditionally route, hierarchically conceived and established programmes of study. This is of course a social and cultural issue as well as an issue of QA, but there is a growing recognition of a need for re-evaluation.

- Two other key factors emerge and are certainly worth further consideration.
1) Considering the global factors at work, further research into international counterparts, programmes and the lessons that can be learnt for this warrant further analysis. The work conducted by Keep (2005) and others points out some interesting comparisons between UK systems and others and these are surely to become more apparent and relevant in the future.

2) Recent changes in the economy need to be taken into account and it would be valuable to look into the effects that these have had upon existing WBL projects and the reflections and recommendations of those involved. It may be that this model needs re-assessment in the light of this or alternatively, that it meets some of the needs of those dealing with rapid change.
7. Bibliography


[http://www.yhelln.ac.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/GES.pdf](http://www.yhelln.ac.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/GES.pdf) [accessed 2/8/9]
Part 3 Implications for education professionals

The following implications are drawn from the analysis of the GES learning experience and conceptual model.

a) Implications of the model

- The role of education professionals changes from owning/controlling to guiding/influencing

- The role of learners changes from enrolling on courses offered to actively identifying their learning needs and ensuring relevant learning content as well as relevant learning style and time and place of delivery.

- The role of employers becomes active in owning and designing the course content and the qualifications

- This raises a question of the relationship between the learner and the employer, and the balance between the two. In the initial stages of the GES, employers and learners expressed independent views about the learning content and qualifications. As the Group developed, such issues tended to become resolved by both employers and learners in partnership, recognising mutual advantages as outweighing differences (e.g. short versus long-term needs, specific versus transferable generic skills).

- The model has implications for the notion of levels of learning and qualification, and in particular the idea of a hierarchy of levels becomes much less important. Focus shifts to relevant learning for a particular purpose at a given time and place, with perhaps a mix of levels. Previous experience and learning at level 6 for example may be followed by learning at level 4 to meet a specific need for basic understanding of a particular subject or issue, yet under recent changes to HEFEC policy (Equivalent and Lower Qualifications) the HEI will receive no HEFEC funding for such students.

- The implications for progression again link to the notion of ownership. The progression route is determined by the learner and employer in partnership, not by the provider and a fixed, hierarchical, process-based qualifications system.

- The model implies that the concept of QA as process has less relevance. A greater focus should be put on QA as quality of outcome in a broader sense (arguably quality enhancement more akin to the Scottish model).

- The model also questions the traditional concept of awards in which the value and recognition of the award is determined by the provider. Greater emphasis is
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given to the recognition of the value of learning by the learner and the employer. This raises issues of transferability and wider recognition of such awards (a debate which has some currency in the context of ‘McDonald degrees’). The award itself is typically seen as less important than the skills and abilities learnt, perhaps suggesting that a record of achievement may be more relevant.

b) implications of the GES experience for working with business

• Working with business is a collaborative activity from which all parties benefit.

• Academics and related staff need to understand business culture. As professionals in education, it is the responsibility of the wider academic community to take the lead in bridging the cultural gap. HEIs should not rely on those in the business community to take the lead and educate them about the ways of business!

• Language can have an important role as barrier between business and academia, but can also provide bridging objects from which the barriers can be overcome

• Flexibility to meet learner and employer needs is essential, while retaining academic professionalism and standards.

• Working with business provides a significant learning opportunity for education professionals, as well as opportunities to widen participation and achieve economic and social benefits.
Part 4 Dissemination

a) Dissemination of conceptual model

The principle method adopted to transmit the lessons to academic colleagues at the University of Hull has been via the PGCHE. The University of Hull PGCE has flexible or framework module ‘Contemporary Issues in Higher Education’.

This module allows participants to identify and issue relevant to their learning and teaching and to explore it in depth. The structure of the module allows individuals to agree a programme of work with the course leader (effectively a personal learning plan for the module). Information content for the module can come from a variety of sources, for example lectures, literature, CPD sessions (arranged for the module, staff development sessions or other CPD). The learning acquired is applied in the context of the learners work. A reflective account draws out the outcomes of the learning and a portfolio completes the learning process.

The background to the GES, the conceptual model and the implications for learning and teaching have been presented as part of a series of workshops offered for participants in the University of Hull PGCHE. This has been shown to be an effective way of disseminating the model. It has the added advantage of providing a forum for critical peer review of the model.

The PGCHE module is at level 7. Flexible or framework modules are available at levels 4, 5, 6 and 7 and can be used to disseminate and accredit the lessons at an appropriate level to a range of participants including academic staff, business trainers, and as CPD to managers and other employees. CPD sessions can be delivered to participants taking accredited and non-accredited courses.

The project outcomes are also being disseminated to the wider academic community through publication and participation in research events, including the National Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) Research Group, the Yorkshire & Humber Lifelong Learning Research Group.

YHELLN has published a Good Practice Guides on Staged Engagement\(^4\) and on Progression\(^5\).

\(^4\) YHELLN, *Staged Engagement*, All the Best, Good Practice Guides, YHELLN, 2009

\(^5\) YHELLN, *Progression*, All the Best, Good Practice Guides, YHELLN, 2009
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b) Dissemination of lessons for working with business

Involvement with the GES has provided experience of working with business. This has complemented experience from other YHELNN initiatives which together led YHELNN to develop and deliver a series of CPD sessions ‘Working with Business’, aimed at staff of academic institutions whose role has not in the past involved significant contact with business but may do so in the future. This is particularly relevant in the light of current government initiatives relating to vocational learning (e.g. the Lifelong Learning Networks).

The Working with Business programme is designed to be delivered by visiting presenters with a successful business background in the topic they are presenting. Where possible, presenters with experience of FE/HE were chosen. Participants were free to attend any number of sessions as they felt appropriate to their current needs. Accreditation was available through the framework modules described above. The programme is currently (Autumn term 2009) being offered for a second time at the University of Hull.

1. **The benefits from collaborating with business**
   University Business Development Director

2. **The HE offer to business**
   University Business and Community Knowledge Exchange

3. **Commercial awareness**
   Entrepreneur and Governor of FE Institution

4. **Understanding how to work with business**
   Head of Academic Business Development

5. **Customer Relationship Management**
   Former Marketing Director, Management Consultant and Lecturer

6. **Marketing and sales**
   Former Marketing Director, Management Consultant and Lecturer

7. **The business role of Consultants**
   Management Consultant
Appendix A

A Report on the Relevance of Environment to Work Based Learning/Employer Engagement.

Dr Keith McDonald

1. Introduction

1.1. This report attempts to provide a survey of where environment has been identified as relevant in employer engagement and work based learning (WBL) initiatives.

1.2. The intention is to explore the current issues and ideas relating to practice and to link these to existing theories relating to environment in WBL contexts.

1.3. It is also an attempt to identify some possible solutions and to suggest further research pathways that may yield outcome.

2. Structure

2.1. On the following pages there is a more detailed review of the Literature found which relates to environment as a significant factor in the context of WBL. This begins with the results of the Greater Economic Success Group (GES) which provides a starting point for some of this research.

2.2. There will then follow a review which places the GES experience in a wider context and locates some of the core problems, issues and solutions that have been identified.

2.3. The review will end with a discussion concerning some of the more conceptual implications of environment in WBL and engage with some sociological theories.

3. GES


Dr. Richard Stakes: Reader in Higher Education, University Centre Doncaster.

Richard Stakes provides a focused evaluation in to the achievements of the GES which has developed a ‘knowledge exchange group’ based in North Lincolnshire. Many of
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those in the focus group interviewed regarding the merits of the project point to the culture of mutual respect and productivity of the group. One interviewee comments:

“The movement is about how you create an environment where you can share strategic thoughts and a more knowledge-based economy. It’s about creating a ‘knowledge exchange’...within a concept of continuous business improvement”.

(3)

Stakes continues:

“The fact that the Kingsway Centre was such a good facility for meetings was also mentioned, as was the willingness of the centre to provide administrative support for the group.” (8)

And that:

“[although] the Kingsway Centre [is] part of North Lindsey College of FE and that part of their role was to support public education in the locality, the group saw the Kingsway Centre as a business venture.” (4)

The relatively autonomous nature of the centre may well provide a suitable forum for the group to meet for a number of reasons. For example:

5) The space is relatively neutral and not housed within one of the facilities of the member organisations.

6) In addition, the centre is not situated in an ‘out and out’ educational environment (such as an FE of HEI campus setting).

7) The Kingsway Centre is very much a business environment, a facility designed and tailored for the culture of business exchange and meeting as opposed to the ‘traditional’ education setting of, for instance, the classroom or seminar space.

8) The members of the group also visited the workplaces of other members on a rotational basis in order to experience the setting in which others conduct their day to day enterprises.

4. **Wider Context**

Nixon et al. point to the disparity between the HEI sector’s skills and innovation built up within a ‘traditional’ (although changing) educational context and the sector’s ability to create successful and reliable WBL models and initiatives.

‘While HEIs have developed pedagogical approaches that work, it is clear that the HE sector as a whole does not as yet fully understand the nature of ‘what works well in practice’ and how different factors (e.g. background of the student, nature of current role, sector of work and size of employer) impact on learning in the workplace. A better understanding of the pedagogy is required.’ (6)

What is relevant here is that the ‘sector of work and size of employer’ is often tied very closely to the environment where the work takes place and that the pedagogical strategies may need to take these factors into account in order to design relevant teaching and learning strategies.

In addition, it is worth considering the fact that HEIs themselves are workplaces that remain relatively static in relation to the work which takes place within. Therefore a lecturer or trainer working within a HEI environment primarily conducts the business of teaching within such an environment and that the WBL experience requires a change in this relative equilibrium. Such changes may include:

• The HEI practitioner moving from the environment in which they usually operate and teach into either a bespoke WBL facility or a workplace where learning is to take place (boardroom, staff development space etc).

• The learner on a WBL programme experiences shifting environments, perhaps within the workplace itself, to a bespoke midway facility or into a HEI environment.
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Of course, these factors are on the one hand a simple, economic, practical and often unproblematic reality. However, practically no research has been conducted into this subject although it is recognised by some as a factor.

4.2. High Road/Low Road: Skills and Innovation in Modern Workplaces. Robert Taylor.

Taylor echoes the ghettoised nature of WBL and the need for a cultural sea change in HE.

‘Skills and innovation at work cannot be taken in isolation. They must form an integral part of what would be a much wider approach to organisational change that is inclusive enough to ensure employees themselves are an active and not a passive influence in what is happening.’ (9)

In addition Taylor points to a problematic trend which potentially undermines the whole concept of WBL as an effective initiative. He continues:

‘[A] declining number of employees are now enjoying personal influence and discretion over the tasks they are required to do in their jobs. They have a less effective say on how those tasks are done, how intensively they work and the standards to which they are expected to work. It should come as no surprise to learn that as a result of this we have seen a marked decline in levels of job satisfaction over time. In short, we may well be creating a more qualified workforce as a result of an expansion in educational requirements but we lack sufficient job opportunities to satisfy the supply.’ (9)

This leads to a fundamental point concerning work and environment and culture. If an employee feels disenfranchised from the business of work and a lack of agency over their own subject position within a work environment, then the notion of work based up-skilling and training is itself unhinged. Alienation from the process of work needs to be addressed in WBL in a number of ways in terms of environment.
1) If the WBL takes place in the environment in which job satisfaction is low, then the likelihood of success is limited in terms of achieving anything more than a welcome respite from the daily grind.

2) If the WBL takes place in either a HEI or a bespoke facility then a similar may be the case or this shift in environment may highlight the alienation of the learner from the base workplace.

The workplace and the agency of the employee is the key here. If an employee is disenfranchised from the work they undertake and as follows the place of work, then work based learning is fundamentally destabilised and its goals are limited. In fact, giving the employee the influence and discretion to undertake training and education with a level of autonomy outside of the work-place and with the employer’s full support may illustrate an engagement and commitment for all involved. What seems to be evident from the success of the GES model is the agency which the stakeholders exhibit and the ability of the participants to meet in a slick, functional and bespoke environment is surely a part of this success.

4.3. ‘Employee involvement, the quality of training and the learning environment: an individual level analysis.’

Alan Felstead, Duncan Gallie, Francis Green and Ying Zhou. Felstead et all. further emphasises the range (or lack of range) of involvement employees have within the workplace and how this may impact on WBL strategies. They write:

‘[H]igh group involvement’ workplaces have over three times the odds of receiving training compared to those working in environments where employee involvement is low...[T]raining is [also] more likely to be given to those at the top of the occupational hierarchy and to those with higher qualifications. On the other hand, those in lower status jobs are far less likely to get training as are those with relatively low qualifications and those working part-time.’(21)
A ‘catch 22’ scenario can occur here, a worker lower in the existing hierarchy is unlikely to have access to education exactly because of their need to receive training in order to move them in a position where it is recognised. This is also fundamentally elitist and highlights an attitude to Higher Education and as a phenomenon which needs to take place outside of the (work place) hierarchy and then supplemented in the workplace. Assumingly, those with Higher Education qualifications did not receive them as a part of an internal WBL strategy due the catch 22 that I have mentioned. Therefore these individuals arrive with HEQs and then gain access to WBL resources. This is recognised by Ewart Keep, ‘those most at risk of unemployment - the least educated and skilled among the adult workforce - are those who will almost inevitably receive the lowest investment in employer-provided education and training.’ (Keep, Learning Organisations, Lifelong Learning and the Mystery of the Vanishing Employers, 14)

A clear two tear system is evident here which disenfranchises the have-nots and affords the luxury of progression to those who have progressed already. This mobility is also evident according to Falstead not simply in terms of progression up a hierarchical structure but also on a peer support and training basis.

‘Employees working in environments which involve workers either as individuals or as team members report a stronger emphasis on on-the-job learning and knowledge transfer than those working in ‘low involvement’ settings. For example, approaching half (48.2%) of those in ‘high group involvement’ workplaces strongly agree that their job requires them to help colleagues to learn compared to around a sixth (17.1%) of those working in ‘low involvement’ environments.’ (31)

This evidence would suggest that in low involvement settings employees are disengaged from WBL on both vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (peer-to-peer) planes. This report echoes Taylor, who outlines the requirements succinctly, ‘skill/high performance workplaces need qualified employees but also employees who are motivated and given discretion and autonomy over their jobs and their career prospects.’ (Taylor, 12)

Daniel Bishop.

Bishop draws attention to the size of the venture in relation to WBL and in particular the wider social context (from a constructivist perspective) in which this functions. They point to the relative agency that those in small business can experience.

‘The informal channels through which employees were able (intentionally or otherwise) to influence decision-making within the small firm allowed greater scope for the social construction of outcomes, including participation in training, by implicating the subjective orientations of each employee in the decision-making process.’ (9)

This would suggest that small firms are more and more akin to the ‘high involvement’ settings that Felstead et al. outline. Bishop et al. also point to the fact that this influence from within the small firm produces influence externally in terms of the ability to communicate the needs and consequently the focuses of the training itself. This is in turn reminiscent of the bespoke model success of the GES.

The report goes on to highlight the subjectivity of WBL and the need for a ‘made to order’ approach:

‘It is processes of social construction such as these that serve to illustrate the crucial point that the approach to training adopted by the small firm (indeed, perhaps, by any organisation) is not determined in a social vacuum through the explicit, objective calculation of economic costs and returns, or simply by the inevitable exigencies imposed by competition in product markets. Instead, it is shaped to a considerable extent by subjective orientations, interpretations, implicit judgments, and social interactions.’ (5)

This notion of informal, made to order WBL and ‘soft skills’ will be further explored in this research (see Appendix B) but what is relevant here is that the ‘subject’ orientations’ is influenced by their relationships to other organisations, environments and spaces. For example, Bishop et al. point to the fact that those without empirical
knowledge of the University environment may feel alienated or at least apprehensive about attending on a WBL basis.

‘[W]hen making participation decisions, individuals seem to draw upon a range of attitudes, dispositions and orientations. For example, those respondents who had never set foot inside a higher education institution, and were apprehensive of such settings, were less disposed towards attending training courses offered by universities....and [f]or most, this attitude appeared to be in significant part socially constructed (and systematically structured) through gendered – and classed – experiences of schooling, careers guidance and entry into the labour market.’ (14)


In ‘A Challenge to Assessment and Quality assurance in Higher Education,’ Richard Winter points to a practical disparity between the WBL experience and the HE experience in terms of access to facilities and support:

‘[in relation to] the expectations and rights of students, namely in the provision of adequate learning environments (libraries, study space and the like), and here it must be admitted that work-based learning students have a problem over and above those of ‘traditional’ students...unless these resources are made available and very clearly implemented, students will feel intolerable pressure to meet the operational demands of their professional role and the demands of the educational process and therefore suffer a significant loss of morale.’ (162-163)

Bound and Solomon then go on to highlight the cultural disparity which can exist in a WBL employer/HEI collaboration.

‘The immediate challenge for all institutions adopting work-based learning is to select staff who can cope with working operating outside of their own disciplinary comfort zone...This required a degree of flexibility and responsiveness to challenges that not all academics can meet...This is a work-
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based learning challenge for the educational institution. In order to meet the needs for the partner, the university has to engage in work-based learning with its own academics.’ (220-221)

4.6 Incorporating into Higher Education Programmes the Learning People do for, in and through Work.

Lyn Brennan and David Hemsworth.

This far reaching guide elaborates some of the concepts offered by Bound and Solomon in relation to the culture of fixity within the academy and the ways this is out of step with the flexible and ‘made to order’ needs of employers. They acknowledge the gradual changes that have been made.

‘Knowledge in practice is constituted in the reflexive processes of the practitioner, the discursive and material processes of the particular context and the socio-political setting. This knowledge does not fit easily into disciplines but it is increasingly acknowledged as valuable in work settings and academia. New epistemologies have emerged from this kind of work; for example, many universities have explored trans-disciplinarity through designing innovative and successful programmes that include work-based research projects.’ (93)

However they also notice that this is difficult to embed into academic culture.

‘The research of the HE academics in this area however can be problematic because although interdisciplinarity has now been embraced by the research councils and by many research centres in universities, trans-disciplinarity has not been widely accepted and remains problematic for researchers who have to categorise their research in particular ways. In most cases there have been problems in gaining funding and recognition for research.’ (ibid)
A tension in academic culture is evident here. Drives towards WBL engagement and a shift in the epistemological boarders of knowledge are desirable from a WBL perspective and as Bound and Solomon point out “this is a work-based learning challenge for the educational institution.” However the drive for academics to specialise in often rigid disciplinary research in order to maintain and develop their own profile and the profile of their employer is not to be underestimated. Considering Bound and Solomon’s claim, isn’t research work-based learning even if it goes against the trans-discipline WBL model? Certainly it is a vital part of the promotion process and the hierarchical HEI system and certainly it is seen as vital in maintaining the knowledge base and up-to-date academic discourse valued by ‘traditional’ HE narratives. Rather than being seen as inflexible and out of date, the academic may well be spread rather thinly and subject to conflicting interdepartmental agendas.

5. Discussion


Ewart Keep (Conference Paper)

Citing Unwin, Fuller and Evans at all., Ewart Keep draws attention to two frameworks of learning, one ‘expansive’ and one ‘restrictive’. An expansive learning framework is a dynamic and integrated model where learning in the workplace involves a dialogue between participants which crosses traditionally held boundaries, cultures and environments. This includes ‘participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace’ and development which ‘fosters chances to extend skills and identity through boundary crossing.’ In contrast, restrictive frameworks have ‘limited participation in communities of practice’ and reductive goals where managers act as ‘controllers and police’ of WBL practice and access. Keep argues that restrictive learning models are common occurrences in the narrative of WBL and that this is fundamentally counterproductive. In addition, he contends that there exists a culture where WBL acts as a conduit for a ‘black box’ of skills that are repeatedly injected in the assumption that
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this will automatically result in productivity, satisfaction and profit. Drawing from Keep and Mayhew, Taylor points to an innovative and ‘high road’ strategy where skilled and educated workers *implement* their qualifications rather than simply wear them as a badge of achievement. He states “[t]he fundamental reason why enterprises fail to accept the high road model to skills and innovation stems not only from the economic environment but the traditionally autocratic and conformist management culture within which they operate.” (Taylor, 7)

As discussed, the view that the learner is afforded agency in a reflexive and dynamic system is at odds with an ‘autocratic and conformist management culture’ identified by Taylor via Keep. In terms of spatial organisation, this has considerable relevance. A conformist management culture will seek to regulate and situate WBL within spatial boundaries in order to monitor, calculate and compartmentalise the learning process. This could include on-site ‘classes’ which are held under the watchful eye of the management or HEI held courses where staff are ‘released’ for a period of time into the arms of the experts. This is at odds with the (somewhat utopian) vision of ‘the learning city’ as outlined by Sue Cara, who outlines the concept of the learning city as follows:

‘The learning city is much more than a society whose members are simply well educated; it goes well beyond merely learning in the classroom. It is a place or a society where the idea of learning infuses every tissue of its being: a place where individuals and organisations are encouraged to learn about the dynamics of where they live and how it is changing; a place that on that basis changes the way in which it learns whether through schools or any other institutions that can help foster understanding and knowledge.’ (In Reeve et al. 2002. 180)

Part of this democratisation of learning comes about by blurring the lines of demarcation concerning where learning takes place and instead promoting a more fluid approach to space and education. Drawing from Poire (1999) Cara et al. highlights the need for a dialogic relationship in which members of community engage and move between perceived borders in order to meet the needs of the community itself rather
than individual closed cultures. This includes ‘business communities learning to support each other’ and developing a ‘capacity for cooperation’ which is highly reminiscent of the GES feedback.

Poire points out the positive effects of shifting environments in order to foster a sense of collegiate identity among different parties. He uses an example where individuals from separate organisations travelled to a foreign location as a part of a scouting process where:

‘The experience of traveling together in a foreign environment helps provide people from different, often antagonistic segments of the local community to get to know each other: it breaks down the barriers among them and provides a common set of experiences and shared knowledge bases on which to build a more co-operative relationship.’ (81)

Although the notion of traveling together in order to forge bonds does not relate to GES, the concept of meeting together in a neutral, bespoke and relevant environment may well help to foster a cooperative and collegiate identity.

Joe Painter relates the concept of social geography to the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu and the concept of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence occurs when one organisation (or set of organisations), institution (s) or power holder (s) imposes their symbolic discourse (practices, codes, conventions etc) on another (s) as the absolute norm with fixity (239-260 in Crang and Thrift). Changes to this involve a reconfiguration of existing social discourse in a manner that some find uncomfortable, challenging and extreme, as noticed by Jim Gallacher and Fiona Reeve:

‘Work-based learning is positioned as a radical disruption of the traditional boundaries between the academy and work, leading to new types of engagement and different kinds of relationships. Here WBL is not just the transplanting of existing programmes into the location of the workplace, but a more radical change in the focus and process of learning.’ (Gallacher and Reeve, 5)
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This is also relevant to spatial ordering which can be used as an organ of power where hierarchies and power holders claim superiority as a function of power itself. In The Logic of Practice, Bourdieu writes:

‘The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of operations necessary in order to attain them.’ (53)

Wee interpret this as an indication that social practices and institutions are durable and retain this durability by an unspoken but powerful reliance on their implied permanence. In the context of alternative educational practices, the accepted norm that ‘real’ or valid HEI qualifications take place within the walls of a university populated with ‘traditional’ students and lecturers may be difficult to counter or adapt. In addition, Bourdieu highlights the function of buildings and places (the structured structures) in this context. These structures are an integral part of the discourse which maintains control simply because of its perceived permanency. Writing on knowledge and its relation to power, Michel Foucault states:

‘Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, ‘becomes true.’ Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.”’ (Foucault, 27)

Knowledge distribution is also a part of these power relations on a variety of levels. Not least the institutions, structures and spaces where knowledge transfer takes place. As Gallacher and Reeve recognise, the concept of reconstituting knowledge exchange in an alternative discourse and site of dialogue involves a radical change. This radical change
disrupts the normalised discourse of power in education and asks us to reconsider the codes, conventions and places associated with teaching and learning. Considering this, as potentially functional, common sense and un-theoretical the notion of conducting educational pursuits outside of the traditional setting may be, the implications themselves are not without weight.

6. Bibliography


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Appendix B

A Report on the Role of Soft-Skills in Work-Based Learning and Employer Engagement Contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1. This report will explore the ways in which soft skills have been identified as relevant in a number of ways in work-based learning (WBL) and employer engagement situations.

1.2. The intention is to consider soft skills in relation to current theory and practice and to link this to broader issues relating to teaching, training and learning.

1.3. The report is intended to interconnect with other research conducted for this project relating to developing models and flexible learning environments and attitudes towards WBL and employer engagement.

1.4. Specifically, the report will aim to identify the links between soft skills used by facilitators of WBL and the ways in which these can in themselves validate and promote soft skills in relation to learners.

2. Structure

2.1. The report will begin by defining ‘soft skills’ and the ways in which the concept features in current educational discourse.

2.2. There then follows a more detailed review of the Literature found which relates to soft skills as a significant factor in the context of WBL. This begins with the results of the Greater Economic Success Group (GES) which provides a starting point for much of what follows.

2.3. There will then be a discussion that places the GES experience in a wider context and locates some of the core problems, issues and solutions that have been identified.

2.4. The review will end with a discussion concerning some of the more conceptual implications of soft skills in WBL and engage with some sociological theories.

2.5. Finally, a summary of key findings will take place.
3. Defining and recognising Soft Skills

3.1. The phrase ‘soft skills’ denotes various interpersonal, communicative and pragmatic abilities. Such soft skills include:

- Communications
- Customer relations
- Customer Service
- People Management
- Coaching
- Teamwork
- Problem Solving
- Leadership
- Supervision
- Negotiation
- Project Management

These skills were often seen as largely informal and intuitive and couched in relation to entrepreneurial instinct or charisma and also seen as rather difficult to quantify and legitimise in teaching and learning models. According to Caudron (1999), Daniel Goldman’s publication of *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* in 1995 is a significant moment in the ways in which soft skills are seen as a valuable commodity in employment sectors. Goldman’s research identifies emotional intelligence (EQ) as valuable and gaining increasing currency and validity. Caudron explains:

> Finally there is hard data to confirm what they've known all along: Personality and character count on the job. Not only that, but there’s also solid research to prove that the skills that contribute to emotional intelligence can be taught.

(Caudron, 1)

Increasing soft skills and EQ have been recognised as important factors which are worth recognition, attention and investment. For example, *The Leitch Review of Skills* identifies a shortfall of skills in the UK skills base and this includes a lack of soft skills particularly in the areas of teamwork and customer service as well as communication and problem solving abilities and stresses that this deficit needs to be addressed. (41)
4. GES


Dr. Richard Stakes, University Centre Doncaster.

Richard Stakes conducts an illuminating summary in to the achievements of the GES ‘knowledge exchange group’ based upon focus group interviews with the parties involved. These parties consist of the staff at the Kingsway Centre which hosted the group, representatives from the engaged businesses, a representative from the local authority and members of staff from the participating university.

An overwhelming response to the groups successes from all involved relates to attitude, communication and flexibility of as a core philosophy of the group. A member of The Kingsway Centre group comments that there is “[a] uniqueness of the GES where there is a business to business engagement with a considerable degree of trust and honesty between the partners”. With another stating “[t]hese companies are open with each other. This comes out in the exchanges made between them and the solutions that are arrived at from identified problems which have been jointly discussed.” Over time this results in a productive group venture involving “people talking to each other […] people feeling relaxed with each other in an environment of mutual co-operation”. (5)

Other respondents are equally sure of the importance of a soft skills approach. A member of the business group attests to “the value of communications which took place between the membership and the quality of the formal and informal education which occurred.” (7) The representative from the local authority champions “a willingness to open the doors to the business of others” and “a lack of preciousness about things”. (10)

In addition, one of the interviewed members of the University pointed out the vital nature of ‘personalities’ who exhibited a passion, welcoming and open minded approach which sums up the evaluation of other participants.

One of the university staff suggests a linear model of three domains that the GES group had gone through during its lifespan and a fourth domain that it was now preparing for (see figure 1).
**Knowledge Transfer Layer:** At this stage, an effort will be made to both broaden the group’s activities and also actively recruit membership across a wide range of local businesses.

**Mutual Trust Layer:** This level is identified by the degree of mutual trust and understanding within the group, where it is working together freely for both the individual and common benefit.

**Education and Training Layer:** Here, coaching takes place between experienced and new members. Meaningful ideas are exchanged. Formal education takes place validated by the university.

**Introductory Layer:** During which the membership made initial contacts and laid the foundations for further professional exchanges through a range of surface level activities.

Importantly, these levels (described by Stakes as a co-operative learning domain) build upon one another and each engenders the next in sequence. A range of soft skills are evident here and crucially a level of flexibility exists throughout. For example, only some willing members will access the formal validated education at a given time whilst others will work more informally. The key is that the informal, soft skills orientated activities acts as a pathway to formal education rather than as an added benefit. Stakes interviewees highlight this:

‘This group argued this relationship was “complementary”, allowing, as one member said, “the hooks to be put into companies at all sorts of different levels to make them think practically.” What this did he said, “was an integral part of what we do. It was not a bolt on”. Such an approach another member of the
group argued, “Allowed both hard and soft skills and knowledge to be examined to bring about cultural change in businesses.” (7)

A key factor in developing this complimentary relationship is time. Brennan and Little chart a range of work based learning programmes that tend to occur. They map a spectrum from the ‘brief encounter’ (less than one week) and the ‘short project’ (several weeks) to the ‘immediate post qualification’ (one to two years) and the ‘continuous professional development’ processes (Brennan and Little, p10). Interestingly, the GES project does not neatly fit into Brennan and Little’s spectrum. In some ways it fulfills the criteria of a CPD option; however the focus on the group as a collaborative and evolving entity alters this. As a continuous and engaged network including education and training, opportunities may well arise out of the project because of its ongoing lifespan. In relation to time, the bonds, exchanges and collaborations (complimentary soft elements) highly valued by the participants are engendered over time and develop as the project lives on.

4.2. Problems and Recommendations.
A number of potential difficulties and warnings come out of the GES evaluation, many of which relate to soft skills. For example, one member of the university focus group felt that the aims of the group were not always visible and that the group at times lost ‘its overall sense of purpose.’ This may in part be to do with the flexible and informal practice identified as opposed to the focused aims of formal education and training and the fact that the GES was constantly evolving and shifting its focus. The same interviewee comments that “there was a potential problem in the developing closeness within and a latent ‘club philosophy’ in the GES and to the danger of its becoming a “meeting of mates” and “merely a talking shop”.” (12) There is a tension here between the highly lauded atmosphere, positive nature and openness and the group and the desire for demonstrable outcomes of the work done which will be explored further in this report.
Although the evaluation is overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of the GES, the respondents are cautious about the idea that the experiences and dynamics of the group can be packaged and exported as a model. One member of the Kingsway Centre group states “it’s about people, – personalities have a lot to do with it and that is not easily replicable anywhere” and another comments “[t]he key is the ability to engage with people.” (6) Members of the university focus group also attest to the key personalities which drive the group as well as the need for time in order to set up a substantial foundation for working (identified in Figure 1 as the Introductory Layer). One member stresses “the importance of groundwork between the educational establishments and local businesses in order to build up a degree of mutual trust, confidence and understanding to develop a clear plan of action” and that these foundations could take a number of years to establish (14). The nurturing of trust, openness and the flexibility that this results in is no doubt due in no small degree to the soft skills so evident in the GES project, however these benefits are hard to timetable and will no doubt fluctuate as other groups form and develop. One useful potential solution to these problems is that burgeoning groups are made aware of the GES experience not as a simple model to be replicated but as a template or case study on which to reflect and plan in a more flexible and dynamic manner. Stakes concludes:

‘It is...recommended that developing groups could usefully be made aware of not only the problems encountered by the GES but also the successful strategies used to overcome them. These groups, it is felt, could best learn from direct, face-to-face contact with the GES and it is recommended that both formal and informal contacts, through a range of appropriate activities, should be available to new groups. It is also noted that such an approach could be mutually beneficial to all parties.’ (16)
5. Key Literature


Evans et al. link theoretical principles and practices relating to work based learning to a number of empirical studies. At the core of the text is the exploration of expansive and restrictive learning environments and the ways that these impact on participants in work based learning. Restrictive learning environments are hierarchical, narrow, and driven by an organisation’s immediate need. Expansive environments are connected with multiple communities and structures, are dynamic, and seek to empower participants beyond immediate needs. This expansive model is based on a ‘unitary’ framework which “sees employers and employees as sharing an identity of interests.” (5) The text outlines and promotes a philosophy of participation which values an array of soft skills and a dialogue among invested participants. This concept of ‘situated learning’ involves recognition that learning takes place in informal and formal contexts which can be complimentary.

‘The concepts of situated learning allow for an extended view on competencies and competency development. Situated learning is not about specialised training of single skills but about experiences and capacities developed through participation. This includes the process of acquiring the cultural attributes of participation: Values and beliefs, common stories and collective problem-solving strategies. It thereby offers an enhanced view of competencies, embodying the mental, emotional and physical processes that are integral to the development and expansion of human capacities.’ (15)

Evans et al. connect their nascent model to the Guile and Young’s ‘connective typology’ model which identifies four models of learning in work-based contexts. One of these
models is *partnership learning* which involves dialogue between the provider, employer and professional institution which emphasises the value of participation and validates all involved for the purpose of common goal achievement. This is reminiscent of the GES project in which the participants came to value the transparent and flexible mode of working as an empowering route.

In addition, this text relates to the fact that a great deal of informal learning often takes place in the work-place which may be tacit. (72) This brings to mind the fact that GES respondents attested to the general atmosphere of exchange within the group and the fact that much of the learning and knowledge transfer within the group takes place in an informal context which is difficult to quantify, record and demonstrate using the conventions of formal education.


This paper begins by situating education and practical professions using a triumvirate blend of competencies which are ideally incorporated into qualifications and awards (see figure 2 below).
Like Evans et al. the writers recognise that soft skills or not discrete ‘sets’ which can be taught using a template, but need to be adapted and adaptable to the work in response to situation.

‘Looking at this from the employer point of view we see that what they want is not good soft skills per se but an ability to operate effectively and appropriately in situ in the workplace, recognising and orienting to context.’ (2)

Shakespeare et al. contend that WP initiatives tend to generally acknowledge soft skills as valuable but this is more complex in education for professions which has to heed to the ‘checks and balances’ of professional recognition. Using studies into nursing and engineering, the report recommends that soft skills need to be more fully integrated into the work invested by all stakeholders and that there seems to be a disparity between WBL initiatives and professional education culture:

‘It is very interesting that our initial work on this which explored what small widening participation projects do in relation to soft skills appeared to value them as prior to a much a greater extent than the professions do and yet when newly qualified workers are in post the employers and the professional bodies find themselves very exercised by the issue of soft skills and we do firmly believe is that a unitary approach to soft skills as simple teachable skills is to totally underestimate a whole raft of elements of professional identity and that there is a huge pool of work remaining to be done.’(5)

Although the report illuminates the disparity between the inclusion of soft skills in widening participation and professional HE education, it does not specifically address the ways in which work based learning activities can blur the boundaries outlined. For instance, an academic may find themselves teaching in both a professional education programme and a work based learning programme. In addition, an employee may have a degree level or above formal professional qualification and extend their education whilst in the profession. Or an employee involved in a work based learning programme
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may have completed a degree or higher qualification in an unrelated subject. If we are to accept the findings of Shakespeare et al. concerning the nuanced differences between programmes, then the subject position of those involved also needs attention. Taking a constructivist approach which appreciates the student’s experiences and socio-cultural position in relation to education, divergent experiences and factors may affect involvement in relation to soft skills. Some questions are:

1) Do students involved with WBL initiatives who have prior professional degrees (or others) value soft skills training less that those with prior experience of widening participation programmes?
2) Do students with divergent subject positions respond to elements of WBL programmes differently?
3) Is retention, success and engagement a factor here?
4) Is the level of qualification a factor here? (e.g. are soft skills valued more at levels 2 and 3 but less so at 7 and 8?)

5.2. Fostering and Assessing ‘Wicked’ Competencies. Peter Knight (The Open University, 2007)

This thorough report considers the issue of ‘wicked’ competencies (soft skills included) and the paradox created by the fact that these competencies are highly valued by employers and universities yet traditionally difficult to assess in a meaningful manner.

“Wicked” competences are achievements that cannot be neatly prespecified, take time to develop and resist measurement-based approaches to assessment. On the basis of knowledge of assessment practices in higher education in general, it was anticipated that there would be acute problems assessing this class of outcomes. And they are also important outcomes of higher education,
since they are widely valued by employers and smooth the path of study and other forms of research.’ (2)

Young and Knight identify nine wicked competencies as listed below:

a. Developing supportive relationships
b. Emotional intelligence
c. Group work
d. Listening and assimilating
e. Oral communication
f. Professional subject knowledge
g. Relating to clients
h. Self management (confidence and effectiveness)
i. ‘Taking it onwards’ – acting on diagnoses

They also acknowledge the ‘fuzzy’ nature of these skills and the fact that there is a lack of clarity about how to fit them into a structured schema and that there is a “[l]ack of agreement about the nature of what is being assessed. Is it a skill, a quality, competence (or competency), attitude, understanding or disposition? Different answers point towards different assessment practices.” (34) The report concludes that it is not the inherent nature of ‘wicked’ competencies that is difficult to assess but rather the outmoded conventions of assessment which hinder the process.

‘Empirical evidence that there are, in fact, few problems in the assessment of ‘wicked’ competences may indicate that there is a problem of ‘false consciousness’, with practitioners simply not seeing how limited their assessment plans are. If that is the case, then not only is there a problem of improving assessment, there is also a far bigger problem in helping colleagues to
appreciate that current practices may have pragmatic value but have very limited value as scientific descriptions of achievement and competence.’ (1)

A key academic that this report references is John Law, a researcher at Lancaster University interested in developing alternative methods of analysis and assessment of elusive and ‘fluid’ work that doesn’t fit into received networks.


Law’s main argument is that academic methods of research and enquiry are based upon a goal of defining and compartmentalising an extremely fluid diaspora of information. He contends that the ‘messes’ often encountered in research are often discounted and ignored and that ‘academic methods of inquiry don't really catch these.’ (2) Although this text relates specifically to social science research, others have extended his hypothesis to assessment in education. He contends that much academic practice is driven by a ‘desire for authenticity’ (9) and that this has produced a self perpetuating set of codes and conventions ill equipped to ‘ephemeral’ and ‘irregular’ qualities. This relates to Young and Knight’s ‘wicked’ skills which can appear near impossible to pin down with conventional modes of assessment. Whilst acknowledging the usefulness of established methodologies, Law calls for an expanded post-structuralist approach which seeks to incorporate that which falls through the cracks of exiting systems. Young and Knight concur with this view ‘that sensemaking, of which assessment is a particular form, involves excluding – that inclusion also presumes exclusion,’ (7) and that Law ‘sets a challenge which has hardly been acknowledged in higher education.’ (8)

Law draws some of his ideas from Michel Foucault and his work on discipline in social conventions. Foucault argues that “we have to get rid of this idea an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic structures or political structures” based upon a fear that this would ruin ‘our economy [and] democracy.’ (Foucault, 261)
In short, although it acknowledged that soft skills are valued and required by a range of employers, agencies and academics alike, the existing and established structures and attitudes relating to assessment in HE and FE cultures and WBL practice may not be yet equipped to deal with the heterogeneous and ‘fuzzy’ nature of such skills.

6. Key Factors to Consider.

Below are ten key factors which relate to this project which have emerged from this report concerning soft skills and WBL.

1) A flexible and dynamic approach helps to foster an environment where soft skills can flourish and act as a complimentary element for those involved. This represents a kind of soft skills philosophy, where subtle, interpersonal and shifting qualities are at the core of much of the work done.

2) Lessons can be learnt by the GES group, in particular the ‘cooperative learning domain’ model where GES can act as a case study. The recommendation that nascent groups also consider the successes and points for development from the GES group as a useful starting point is also potentially valuable.

3) All stakeholders need to be committed to a system in which soft skills can flourish. A hierarchical model which privileges formal or hard skills as the end point will be counterproductive to the fostering of soft skills so valued by employers.

4) Participants all bring soft skills to the network which is to the benefit of all. For example, the soft ‘personable’ skills of the staff at the Kingsway Centre helped to create an atmosphere of free and transparent exchange can take place thus allowing knowledge transfer to take place. It is not a top down model which teaches soft skills, rather, soft skills act as a conduit for exchange, bond-building and learning.

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See [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmeduski/37/3705.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmeduski/37/3705.htm)
5) Environment is an important factor (see report on the relevance of environment in WBL).

6) Time is also a factor, the complementary aspects of soft skills need to be seeded and developed and this requires a time span in order to work. From Young and Night’s ‘wicked’ competencies model “developing supportive relationships”, “relating to clients,” “self management” and “taking it onwards” all require time for obvious reasons.

7) Using a constructivist model, the subject position of the participant in relation to socio-cultural factors may also need to be taken into account. For example, the student’s prior educational background, training, work experience and relation to other WBL models may all play a part in their attitude towards soft skills as a viable educational matter. In addition, the level of award may be relevant here.

8) Assessment is also a factor. Although Night and Page contend that soft skills in themselves are not difficult to assess, the ingrained modes of assessment in education and training are not malleable in relation to these competencies.

9) Law and others expand this idea in drawing from post-structuralism theory in which, systems, codes conventions are challenged as normative practices. Although established modes of working in education and training are valuable, their inherent establishment (their establishedness) perpetuates their durability. Therefore, alternative modes and approaches will often be seen as inherently alien, alternative and potentially subversive by the nature of their prescribed ‘otherness’.

10) The requirement then is for an attitude that is open and prepared for change. A tabula rasa may seem radical, unnecessary and unmanageable to many, but rather than dismiss such an approach as impossible, it may be more fruitful to consider why such a radical approach appears so radical in relation to current and historic practices. Once this has been fully considered, more options may become viable.
10. Bibliography


Appendix C

A Report on the Relevance of Language Barriers to Work Based Learning/Employer Engagement.

1. Introduction

1.4. This report attempts to provide a survey of where language barriers have been identified as problematic in employer engagement and work based learning (WBL) initiatives. In addition, it will identify relevant issues and debates in sociolinguistic studies.

1.5. The intention is to explore the current issues and ideas relating to practice and to link these to existing theories of language in professional contexts.

1.6. It is also an attempt to identify some possible solutions and to suggest further research pathways that may yield outcome.

2. Summary of Findings

2.1. On the following pages there is a more detailed description of the findings. This section identifies the general themes.

2.2. The issue of language barriers in the context of employer engagement and WBL is identified as a key factor in a number of recent reports on the matter.

2.3. There are also a number of suggested strategies and solutions highlighted that may help to overcome the problem of language barriers.

2.4. There are a significant amount of socio-linguistic theories and debates concerning language and ‘discourse communities’, some of which relate specifically to occupation and some of which relate to cultures within education.

2.5. Although language barriers are identified as problematic, there is not a coherent and proven strategy to overcome such a problem across networks.

2.6. There are some potential solutions which may be worth following up in more detailed research.

3. Reports where language barriers are identified

3.1. Work-based learning: illuminating the higher education landscape.
Conceptualising learning and teaching for the ‘new lifelong learning sector’

Iain Nixon, Kevyn Smith, Rob Stafford, Steve Camm (June 2006, The Higher Education Academy)

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/wbl_illuminating.pdf

This report offers a summary of the current state of HE and WBL and is based on a study carried out by the Higher Education Academy.

3.2. On language barriers

The report notes that ‘everyone has a view on what work-based learning means and they use a wide range of terms interchangeably (e.g. workplace learning, work-related learning, vocational learning). This all goes to confuse the situation and undervalue the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level. It is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an institution’s and employer’s perspective, irrespective of the terms used. This will be the first step in establishing a common language.’

The report goes on to note ‘Overcoming cultural differences and language barriers to establish a shared strategic intent will require substantial time and effort on both sides. Additional resources will be required.’

3.3. Higher Education and the Workplace – supporting employer engagement in engineering and physical science.

Richard Dales and Carol Arlett (June 2008, The Higher Education Academy)

hca.ltsn.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/events/conference/2008/Richard_Dales.doc

3.4. This report stems from the ‘Engage’ project; an initiative led by the HE Academy Engineering Subject Centre (EngSC) under the banner Facilitating Dialogue between Employers and Engineering, Physical Sciences and Materials Academics in Higher Education.
3.5. On language barriers.
Several points emerged from partnership meetings regarding language. The report states ‘The playing field is a ‘muddy’ and complex one with a wide range of stakeholders all having an interest in the agenda; it is not always clear what the role and contribution of these stakeholders are and this makes partnership working difficult’.
In addition a key point to emerge from the project is that ‘Education has been slow to respond to the needs of the employers and the language used can be mystifying. These are challenges as well as being real opportunities for HE. Flexible responsiveness seems to be key.’

3.6. Exploring Employers’ Perceptions of Employer Engagement
Maria Hughes and Barry Smeaton (2007, The Learning and Skills Development Agency)
http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/docs/lsn_employer_engagement.pdf

3.7 This report brings together findings from LSDA research projects on employer engagement, exploring a range of issues and focusing on the perspective of employers.
A number of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and Business Development Units (BDUs) were involved in the project and were encouraged to assess their own participation in the process.

3.8. On language barriers
The report states that when providing training ‘The language used is not always comprehensible. In larger companies staff may be familiar with jargon, but not necessarily staff in small firms.’
The LSDA produced a framework for responsiveness which indicated what colleges needed to do to improve their employer-facing work in relation to the principles of responsiveness. The colleges then undertook a self-assessment of their provision to assess the extent to which it met the principles of responsiveness. The self-assessment process was undertaken in a common format, based on the framework of responsiveness.
One of the key issues of the framework used to gauge the success of an employer and provider engagement is that ‘jargon-free language is used.’

Some of the feedback from colleges on the use of jargon-free language included the following statements:

“A constant difficulty in education!”

“When specialists are brought into the enquiry loop, jargon is inevitable and there have been examples of this occurring, especially between training staff and engineers.”

“Some staff have a tendency to use technical language inappropriately and this acts as a barrier to communication.”

“Technological subjects involve jargon and therefore it is impossible to avoid its inclusion.”

3.9. Linking Professional Associations with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Relation to the Provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Professor Andy Friedman and Christina Williams with Sarah-Louise Hopkins and Lowri Jackson (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

March 2008)


3.10. This project, undertaken by the Professional Association Research Network (PARN) aims to encourage mutually beneficial links in terms of better communication and understanding as well as joint working between professional bodies and higher education institutions (HEIs) and other education and training suppliers in relation to CPD.

The project holders used two surveys, one for professional bodies and one for HEIs, along with 26 case study interviews of professional bodies.

3.11. On language barriers

The project takes into account some existing research in order to set out a valuable survey of the current landscape on the issue of employer engagement where yet again language barriers are seen as key.
Observations include:

“Parties in the market need to consider the language around CPD, the different understandings of its uses and its various permutations into ‘professional development’, or ‘executive training’ in order to build successful partnerships.”

Specifically on the issue of CPD and the ways in which it is packaged for employers, the writers notice an interesting tension regarding commercial and academic language: ‘What is interesting here is that the motivation for deciding content of the courses is very much explicitly decided to be market driven as opposed to product driven. The emphasis is on what will give most added value for the employer. This is a very commercial approach to course development and the perception of educational value. The language used here is very commercial, even the use of ‘value added’ as a learning outcome is a phrase that would be unheard of in ‘university’ speak. In comparison, HEI promotional material tends to focus on the quality of the product they are offering, rather than contextualising it in the market or responding to market needs. City of Bath College, on the other hand, are “…not selling qualifications but selling business solutions”.

Some common concerns about language use are identified and are also applicable as a summary of the opinions of the other reports taken into account.

It states ‘Speaking the same language is crucial to successful relationships between HEIs and professional bodies. It was often noted in the professional body interviews that professional bodies, commercial suppliers and HEIs are using a bewildering array of different terminologies.’

Two interesting points also emerge from interviews.

a) Some of the more successful working relationships between professional bodies and HEIs took place when those managing the relationship had academic backgrounds and could speak to providers using academic language in a brokerage scenario (which will be explored in more detail later in this report).

b) Some professional bodies felt that they may have to prove their credibility and academic rigour when dealing with academics. This could include the perceived
need for the use of an ‘academic register’ in exchanges between participants. From this, it is reasonable to surmise that this is a two way street and that academics may feel that they need to prove their professional credentials and to those who have job savvy.

4. Some Existing Strategies

4.1. Networking

PARN states the following:
‘Events, committees, or online industry forums are all mechanisms for bringing all of the parties together to discuss and understand each other’s perceptions and needs and to begin to develop a shared language. Even something as simple as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting’s ‘International Calendar of Events’ on their website can bring together a variety of players and inform each other of what is happening.’

4.2. Brokerage

[http://www-linkinglondon.ac.uk/docs/Work-based%20learning%20employer%20engagement%20report.pdf]
James Chappell suggests that an organisation such as Linking London could mediate between HEIs and employers in order to negotiate the cultural and language barriers that may be present. He recommends that:
‘This could help facilitate a coherent offer from the network to employers. A brokerage service could also operate as one, client focused, point of contact for employers and address issues such as the perceived language and cultural barriers between education and work.’

4.3. Common Language

Exiting systems such as the National Occupational Standards (NOS) provide a potential model for using a common language which links industries, sectors or occupations in
order to facilitate successful communication. This is an example of how sector skills councils (SSCs) employers and standard setting bodies can work in partnership to agree a language appropriate for good practice. However the challenges involved in taking this model and applying it to the multitude of knowledge bases involved in HEIs and occupational settings is vast. Nonetheless, there may be lessons to be learned from such strategies that can be adapted to the employer engagement process.

5. Language Issues and Debates

Koester identifies the concept of discourse communities; which in this context relates to workplace areas where specific language is used as a part of an occupational dialect. This includes the use of specialist lexis or field specific semantic fields where a shared vocabulary is used by those ‘in the know.’ Koester writes, ‘people working together in the same organization or field have mechanisms of intercommunication and use professional genres and specialist lexis. Linguists refer to such professional groups as discourse communities in order to emphasize the important role that language plays in their constitution.’ (15)

Bhatia focuses on the issue of genre, specific ‘types’ of language interactions used in specific contexts (e.g. memos, interviews, diagnosis etc) that exist in workplace situations.
Bhatia quotes Swales when identifying the concept of genre: ‘it is a recognisable communicative event characterized by a set of communicated purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert
members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognizable purpose(s).’ (13)

Tension may arise when those familiar with a particular genre interact on a professional basis with those familiar with another, the outcome being the impression that the participants speak a different language. In a scenario where members of different discourse communities claim expertise on a shared subject, barriers occur.


This text focuses on the issue of power in language interactions and in particular the ways in which language can be used to promote or undermine particular ideological standpoints. The authors note that in work based discourse communities, the attitudes and values of the profession are promoted in the occupational dialect.

‘The resources of each language allow for different discourses, which can reflect and reinforce the ideology of the groups they are used by….socially powerful groups can use language to perpetuate their ideologies. Because we do not always interrogate language use, assuming it instead to be a ‘natural, obvious’ medium of representation, we can become normalised to the ideological perspectives that discourses encode, seeing them instead as ‘common sense’.’ (33)

When cultures that have different values and ideologies meet, there can occur a culture clash and one of the main ways this can be seen is in a breakdown in communication. This is relevant to an extract form a professional body interview undertaken by PARN:

“I think the other thing is you’d also have to re-think, again it’s the jargon. Enterprise, innovation, entrepreneurship. They mean things in universities. I’m not sure they mean exactly the same thing in the commercial world and sometimes I think universities get hooked up on an academic appreciation of terms where they should be looking at, ‘Alright, who’s our major competitive provider? what are they calling themselves?’, and very often it’s surprising. It’s nothing that you would expect a university labelling to be …”

This study looks at the issue of pragmatics in language, that is, the at times unspoken codes connected to language use. Halliday highlights the ‘codes’ of language. These are the complex and subtle ways in which language users position themselves when speaking or writing. He writes ‘codes are different patterns and habits of speech adopted by speakers of the same language as a result of sub-cultural variation.’ (236)

Bernstein states that although these codes do not have any particular value in themselves, society assigns value to them: ‘clearly, one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibility. Society, however, may place difference on the orders of experience elicited...through the different coding systems.’ (237)

If complex terminology and jargon (be it professional or academic) is viewed as being higher in a language hierarchy then those who do not possess or use such jargon may feel alienated from its speakers and as a result become an unwilling participants in an interaction. This is further emphasised in a scenario where one participant seeks to instruct another on an area of their own expertise (teaching grannies to suck eggs).


This article suggests that education is not a simple exchange of information for learning, but a way in which a certain type of ‘studious’ behaviour is promoted. Gutierrez states that academic discourse privileges language ‘competence’ above other skills and that ‘competence in...society is illustrated by one’s ability to interact in culturally appropriate ways with other members of society who are already competent’. (28) As such, there is the danger that academics expect others not only to show knowledge, but to show it in a certain way which bends to the academics values which in turn positions the academic higher in the pecking order. Imagine a situation where a training programme doesn’t value the fact that a trainee can demonstrate knowledge but only their ability to communicate in a certain manner regardless of its practical worth to the learner. The complaint that CPD etc simply asks participants to ‘jump through hoops’ is common to many.
6. Suggestions for Further Research

6.1. Technology

6.2. *The future size and shape of the higher education sector in the UK: threats and opportunities.*

Nigel Brown et al. (Universities UK, 2008)
[http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/Size_and_shape2.pdf](http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/Size_and_shape2.pdf)

This comprehensive report defines three scenarios which could occur in the HE sector over the coming decades. One of the things that unite all three is the expected proliferation of technology in education. One scenario predicts that ‘Serious and continued investment in digital learning systems and wireless technology allows an increase in the scale and reach of higher education programmes and provides 24/7/365 opportunities for learning at this level. The scale of operation and the ability for students and teachers to communicate remotely significantly reduces unit delivery costs, making higher education more affordable to students who have to meet the cost of their own fees.’

The use of technology as a communicative tool could have a serious impact on language barriers. For example, academics and professionals could engage with one another over a computer mediated programme of study where the technology itself acts as a broker which employs a common language accessible to all participants and which does not privilege one discourse community over another.

The use of technology as a leveller in terms of communication it certainly worth considering and further research into the matter is suggested.

6.3. Internal Sub-Divisions


In this ‘textography’ Swales examines the discourse community of a small American university. His findings reveal that within this setting, rather than seeing one coherent discourse or occupational dialect, many sub-discourse communities are evident. He asks
‘is a university a discourse community, or rather a college, or only a department, or only a specialization within a department?’ (21) Many of the reports encountered during this research identify the communication barriers between employers and HEIs and others providers, but few identify language between and within HEIs, colleges and departments, not to mention HR departments, managers and staff. It may be that language barriers are far more widespread and limiting than initially anticipated.

6.5. Flexibility

6.6. The PARN report suggests some potentially fruitful ways of approaching language barriers.

It was suggested that professional bodies also needed to take a strategic approach and assess carefully what they wanted out of relationships, and build on existing relationships. One group suggested that professional bodies needed to “adopt a fair and general approach to HEIs in general e.g. in badging provision”. To do so, they need to take into consideration the difficult and complex attitudes around badging and accreditation and avoid bureaucracy where it is not necessary. They ask: “Could a QE rather than a QA approach be more helpful?” One group offers an interesting suggesting for networking, breaking down language barriers, and more cohesive potential:

“Consider usefulness of volunteers who come from HEI background and offer career breaks”.

This level of diversification and flexibility towards employer engagement which places a burden of responsibility on both professional body and the provider could expand the concept of the relationship as more of a dialogue rather than a deal and could have significant impact on the communicative effectiveness of the exchange.
7. Bibliography


