

# Using a Virtual Learning Environment to enhance reflective practice in work-based learning

## Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to develop a greater understanding of how a virtual learning environment (VLE) discussion forum can be used to enhance reflective practice in work-based learning.

**Design/methodology/approach** This study adopted a qualitative approach and undertook a content analysis of VLE (Blackboard) discussion forums, followed by a thematic analysis of data gathered through a follow-up focus group.

**Findings** The findings suggest that whilst VLE discussion forums can help to provide a bridge between two distinct communities of practice, individual reflective practice, as opposed to group reflection, was still found to be paramount, with *reflection on experience* as the main category.

**Practical implications** Original views of students have been gathered and these can be used to inform future practice.

**Originality/value** The findings can be used to better understand and enhance reflective practice of students on work-based learning placements.

**Keywords** Higher education, Work-based learning, Reflective practice, Virtual Learning Environment, Communities of practice

**Paper type** Research Paper

## 1. Introduction

It is now widely accepted that Work-based learning (WBL) is an effective method for equipping graduates with a range of practical skills to help them to function effectively in the workplace (Jackson, 2015). Yet there can be real difficulties in facilitating this important phase of a student's transition from education to work. Given the contemporary positioning of the student as 'customer' and an undergraduate degree as the key to future employability, managing this transition is arguably one of the biggest challenges that the Higher Education (HE) sector faces today (Wood, et al, 2015).

As a consequence, there is little doubt that students live in two communities of practice – those of employment and of higher education (Gibbs and Costley, 2006). And yet despite the reality of that split, the attempt to bring together these two domains, through the implementation of WBL practice in a Higher Educational context, means that students are required to provide evidence, reflect on their work experiences and examine them in the light of theoretical knowledge, but in the majority of cases, this happens only at the level of each individual student. This is usually because standard practice dictates that only the WBL tutor and/or mentor has access to the results of each student's reflection. It is therefore important to consider methods by which students can still engage in communities of practice and reflection, regardless of the sometimes relatively isolating effect of engagement in work based learning.

This paper therefore examines the results of a project designed to bring together the two domains of community practice referred to above, through the facilitation of a university work-based learning community using the specific discussion-based functions of a Virtual

Learning Environment (Blackboard). The objective was to enable students undertaking work placements to keep in touch via a text-based, asynchronous discussion forum, to help make their observations, practices and learning outcomes explicit. Final year undergraduate Sport Development students were asked to contribute to a Blackboard discussion forum by responding to weekly discussion topics and to engage in dialogue through that forum with their peers. The overarching aim of the project was for the students to develop a more reflective approach to WBL, on both an individual and group level, using Blackboard (BB) as a way to bridge the current gap between the educational and employment-based communities that they inhabited. However, the facilitation of this learning community also offered insights into other important aspects of work-based learning, including:

- Greater understanding of what types of reflections students engaged with.
- Enhancements in peer interaction as both community function and as part of the learning process.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Work-based Learning**

At its broadest level, WBL might be defined as relating to “all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns” (Lester and Costley, 2010: p2). However, given the Higher Education context of this paper, WBL is more specifically understood to be the term used to describe “a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces” (Boud and Solomon, 2001: p5. See: Lemanski *et al*, 2011). WBL may also go by other names, such as: work-integrated learning; work-related learning; work experience/study programmes; or it can be linked to experiential learning methods, and even to some types of problem-based learning, when these are associated with real organisations. Regardless of the specific definition or the context in which it is used, there can be little doubt as to the importance of WBL in modern higher education. In fact, in some instances, work experience has been found to be as important as educational qualifications when employers are seeking to distinguish between job applicants (Fletcher and Cullinane, 2017). This is driven by two broad motivations: employer needs for higher skilled graduates who are able to transition more easily into the workplace; and by student demand for better employment prospects upon graduation. However, such a simple supply/demand interpretation should not hide the multiple benefits and complexities of WBL, for both student and organisation alike (Garnett, 2016). These are perhaps best illustrated by examining some of the key features or attributes of WBL.

Broadly speaking, the skills that students can gain and develop via WBL can be split into two categories (Lemanski *et al*, 2011). The first of these is constituted by the kinds of work-related, transferable skills that are beneficial to all employees at all stages of their careers, including: action planning; contribution to meetings; entrepreneurship; goal setting; negotiating; networking; project management; self-appraisal; team working; and using/acting as a consultant (Lemanski *et al*, 2011). The second can be referred to as work-based learning skills, which more clearly relate to the nature of the learning experience. These rely on learners taking the theoretical knowledge they have on a particular topic and combining this with their own experiences in order to enhance their personal development within the workplace itself (Lemanski *et al*, 2011). Such skills include developing solutions to workplace problems drawing on theory and practice; exploiting the workplace as a learning resource; managing oneself (and others); transferring existing knowledge, capabilities and

competences to new or different contexts; reflecting on what has been learnt in and from the workplace (Lemanski *et al*, 2011). Raelin's (2000) discussion of WBL attributes summarises these lists quite pithily, emphasising in essence, that what differentiates WBL from learning in traditional academic settings is that through WBL, the focus is primarily on reflection on work practices and learning from experience; learning in other words, arises from actions and problem solving within a working environment so that the creation of knowledge is a shared and collective activity (Raelin, 2000). As a result, WBL requires not only the acquisition of new knowledge but the acquisition of meta-competence – learning, that is, *to learn*.

## 2.2 Communities of Practice

All of these attributes are essential for successful WBL, but nonetheless, the reality is that different work placements provide a range of very different contexts of learning and as a result, learning experiences within them can be inconsistent, which is a fact that cannot be ignored and needs to be more effectively managed. Some placements, for example, may simply involve a student's temporary 'attachment' to an external, formal organisation, which provides certain insights into operations or professions. At the other end of the spectrum, placements can be described as real examples of a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998), in which people share a concern and passion about their area of expertise and create strong conditions for learning and professional development, in particular by facilitating techniques and scaffolding to support the movement from 'novice' to 'expertise' (Wenger *et al*, 2002).

Although evolving over time (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014), Wenger's original ideas sought to move away from the more traditional understanding of learning as an individual endeavour, towards a recognition of the necessity of co-production in relation to learning, to seeing it as a fundamentally "social process" instead (Morley, 2016: p161). The key elements to Wenger's model are: the Domain; the Community; and the Practice, all of which he regarded as crucial. The Domain is where the members are brought together by their shared learning need. The Community develops from the bond created in the members' collective learning experience. The Practice refers to the 'shared repertoire' of resources, which the learners create through that shared experience (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015: p2). Figure 1 illustrates how these essential elements combine to create a 'learning partnership', between the organisation and the community members, in this case within a WBL 'host' organisation.

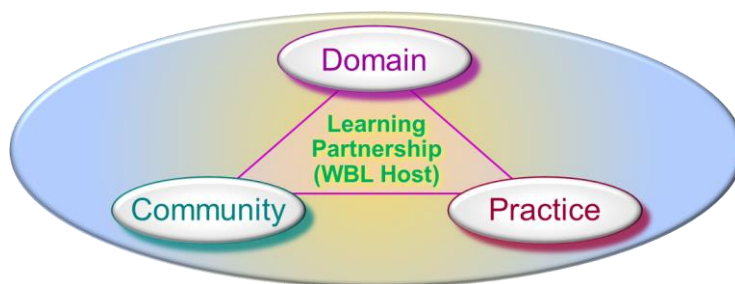


Figure 1: The WBL Host Community of Practice

(Adapted from: <https://wenger-trayner.com/project/a-social-discipline-of-learning/>)

For the vast majority of Higher Education courses, students are first inducted into, and spend most of their time, engaged in university life. Here they engage in the same essential elements seen in any community of practice. It is usually only later in their course that they are introduced to the other community, to which they are temporarily attached, in the WBL host organisation. Parilla and Hesser (1998) agree with Gibbs' (2006) notion of students living in two communities of practice, by suggesting that WBL forces the student to adopt two different roles; that of the employee performing day-to-day tasks, and that of the student pursuing knowledge and understanding. Students are required to reflect and examine their work experiences whilst at the same time, continuing to operate as members of the University community of practice, dealing with course tasks and requirements, as well as engaging with other community members (fellow students), to develop their shared learning experience (figure 2). 'Communities of practice' as defined by Wenger (1998), therefore, provide a way of understanding these two spheres within this article, understood to operate as social vehicles of learning that are viewed as being important for both learners and an organisation itself.

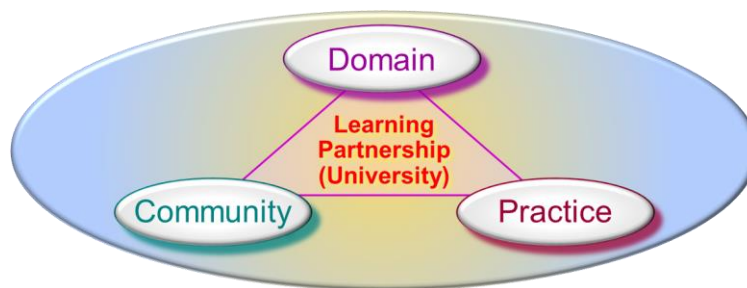


Figure 2: The University Community of Practice

(Adapted from: <https://wenger-trayner.com/project/a-social-discipline-of-learning/>)

### 2.3 Learning from reflection

Effective WBL requires not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to the world of work, but the development of the ability to learn, to take on that knowledge and such skills effectively in the first place. Learning is a process both of enculturation, as well as of cognitive and social self-organisation (Cobb, 1999, Billett, 2001). Students can apply different learning strategies within these contexts, either by passively adapting themselves to the requirements of the host and/or learning contract, or by engaging proactively, seeking new knowledge and opportunities for skills development. The extent to which students learn how to 'negotiate' their learning depends on their ability to be able to reflect on knowledge creation and their own personal skills development, an ability that may differ between individual students, but that is nonetheless a skill that can itself be taught (Griffiths *et al*, 2000).

Understanding what constitutes reflection, and what significance it has in educational context, has been the subject of some debate in pedagogic and psychological literature. A more traditional understanding of reflective activity is grounded in the idea that an individual student or teacher learns to reflect on a particular experience individually, but as suggested above, this ignores the fact that learning is never realistically an isolated, individual pursuit, and limitations of this approach have been widely discussed (Cinnamond & Zimpher, 1990).

As an acknowledgement of such critiques, an understanding was developed of reflection *in* and *on* action wherein the person undertaking the reflection not only engages with the action taken itself, but also seeks to try to understand the elements of understanding attained prior to - and which are implicit within - the behaviour that is trying to be understood (Schön, 1983). The importance of combining individual action and engagement with reflective thinking to develop greater understanding of the content being studied has been widely accepted since, and not least in relation to WBL (Kolb, 1984).

The importance of reflective practice in WBL is clearly illustrated by the extent to which it plays a key part in both facilitating learning, and in assessing achievement of learning outcomes (Lemanski *et al*, 2011). Reflection encourages both workers and learners to question values underpinning practice, allows for the integration of theory and practice, and enables the practitioner to challenge assumptions about practice (Siebert, 2008). Reflective practices also help the participants to make sense of their project experience and its meaningfulness (Raelin, 2000). At the same time, it has also been recognised that dialogue can be an important factor in encouraging critical reflection (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). This is not least because it is thought that this interaction encourages students to reflect on their own and each other's experiences, and either apply results of reflection in their own context of practice, or use them to enlarge a broader, more general understanding of the professional community. A key issue for HE facilitators of WBL, therefore, lies in trying to help students to combine the benefits of reflection with engagement with their WBL community of practice, whilst also enabling students to continue effective involvement with the university community of practice, which is critical to completion of their broader programme of study. It is here that the role of tutors becomes key.

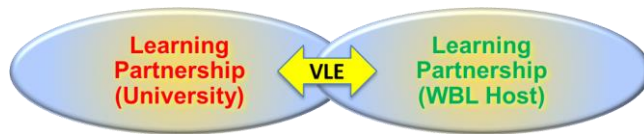
#### *2.4 WBL and the role of tutors*

Managing Higher Education WBL programmes necessitates different techniques and structures to support and facilitate students, than are used in more conventional programme elements (Lester and Costley, 2019). The role of the tutor is critical to both managing these techniques and structures, and to enabling students to learn more effectively (Stephens *et al*, 2014). More specifically, tutor support is key in developing a learner's meta-competence skills, that is, the role of the tutor is vital to help facilitate the students' reflective abilities that, as has been outlined above, are crucial to bridging the gap between educational and employability practice communities (Gray, 2001; Sutcliffe, 2019). Although it is not a practice that is widely adopted globally, within the UK, personal tutoring has a long and varied history, but today is seen almost universally, to be an important part of the academic offering (Lindsay, 2011). This is not least because of the important role played by personal tutors in both acting as a conduit between student and the HE institution, and in enhancing the student-centred approach to teaching and learning, which has become a fundamental feature of modern higher education (Dixon, *et al*, 2019). It is a role that has continued alongside, rather than being replaced by, the increasingly widespread adoption of online and virtual learning techniques.

#### *2.5 Using VLEs to support WBL students*

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have played a pivotal role in the facilitation of online learning, which has increased dramatically over the last decade – and of course, exponentially during the global coronavirus pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic however, there is little doubt that as the technology developed, VLEs had come to be a key teaching tool, allowing personal tutors to be able to perform their role more effectively. Perhaps even more

importantly here, they can also be used to help students to bridge their engagement with two communities of practice more effectively, not least (figure 3) by enabling new forms of dialogical reflection, as a means to improve both learning and practice.



*Figure 3: Bridging the University-Host Communities of Practice*

(Adapted from: <https://wenger-trayner.com/project/a-social-discipline-of-learning/>)

Facilitation of reflective practice through online interaction has been already been discussed, in the context of both theoretical and applied research and has emphasised the general importance of providing and overseeing structured opportunities for reflection, the use of reflection to improve both learning and practice, and the conditions of the learning environment that encourage its use (See: Avis & Fisher (2006); Barab *et al*, 2004; Moon, 1999). Discussion forums within VLEs in particular, are seen to provide explicit structures for reflective thinking and to operate as an important tool for bringing ideas together, fostering convergence of thinking, and sharing of insights or interpretations (McLuckie & Topping, 2004; Stahl, 2000). The asynchronous nature of this form of communication also allows participants to be more reflective, and significantly reduces scheduling problems and time limitations (Stahl, 2000).

The discussion forums that VLEs provide, therefore offer the potential to operate as a medium in which students can reflect on their own and each other's experiences not only within their own context of practice, but to learn from the context of others' they are interacting with on the discussion boards too. Enabling students to discuss their collective learning experiences as a 'community of practice' can help provide an insight in a particular profession or job role (Forsyth and Cowap, 2017) and create strong conditions for learning and professional development (Wenger *et al*, 2002). The purpose of this paper was, therefore, to develop a greater understanding of using an online discussion forum to facilitate individual and group reflection to enhance the learning process.

### **3. Methodology**

As the emphasis was on capturing the subjective experiences and understanding amongst students, a qualitative approach was taken (Gratton and Jones, 2004; Greener, 2011). A qualitative approach allows the researcher to attain a more 'naturalistic' expression of the everyday lived experiences of research participants, by allowing them to define the categorisations of their own knowledge and practices rather than relying on those defined for them by a framework imposed by the researcher, instead (Greener, 2011).

#### *3.1 Participants*

Nineteen final year BSc (Hons) Sport Development students undertook 20-day work-placements in various sport related organisations, as part of their WBL module. During this period, teaching on other modules was collapsed, so the placement could be undertaken full-

time, over four consecutive weeks. The majority of placements tended to be within education (primary and secondary teaching), coaching, sport development, sports management, local authority, voluntary clubs or health clubs. The assessment for this module required students to submit an individual reflective report which included a clear justification for the placement they had undertaken, highlighting; why they chose the area; what they did; why they did it; what they achieved; what they would do differently; and what the outcomes would be. The assessment also needed to include clear evidence of critical reflection in relation to both the process of undertaking the project, and of the students own development. The students were asked, on a voluntary basis, to participate in an online discussion forum. The participants' contributions to the discussions were not assessed, but it was made clear that their contributions to the discussion forum would be closely monitored (although not moderated) by their personal tutors so that such contributions could be used to provide evidence for their assessed reflective report, to be submitted at the end of the module.

### *3.2 Research method*

University ethical approval for the study was secured, following which all participants of the study completed consent forms and were given an opportunity to ask questions about their involvement and related research. All participants were given the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any time and all answers and identifying elements within the paper have been anonymised. The reflective writing took place on the VLE (Blackboard) discussion forum in asynchronous mode once the placements had commenced. The students, who were all undertaking their placements in different contexts, were encouraged to participate via a two-level model of involvement.

This was designed to facilitate both individual as well as group reflection, to give everyone an opportunity to contribute to achieve a shared understanding (Pedler, 1997). The first level was a structured critical reflection of students on their daily WBL experience and review of their own personal and professional knowledge and skills development through the narratives and discourse, providing examples to support it. The second, discussion-based level, enabled students to reflect on each other's skills and knowledge development and create a shared, collective experience. Although a new topic for discussion was posted each week, existing discussion threads remained available and active.

The discussion topics and areas were:

- Week 1 - Reflection & Work-Based Learning
- Week 2 - Organisation and your role
- Week 3 - Team working & how roles and experiences relate or differ from each other
- Week 4 - Communication & Networking
- Week 5 - Reflection on personal employability
- Week 6 - Reflection on employer' perception of graduate employability
- Week 7-12 - No discussion topics due to Christmas period
- Week 13 - Impact on organisation
- Week 14 - Initiative and creativity
- Week 15 - Information and Communication Technology
- Week 18 - Review of placement

One week after the completion of the placements, students were invited to participate in a focus group with twelve of the original nineteen expressing a wish to do so. Prior to the start



of the focus group, the participants were issued with an information sheet about the study and asked to sign a consent form.

### *3.3 Data analysis*

Blackboard (VLE) statistics were utilised to explore the extent to which students engaged with the VLE discussion forum. A content analysis was conducted to provide insight into patterns of online interaction and types of reflection (individual and group level) present within the postings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Distinct themes were then used to differentiate between ‘types’ of reflection, which were then formatted using an open-coding table (Mason, 2002; Greener, 2011). The data was annotated and coded (Denscombe, 2010) into identified categories of similar meanings (Moretti et al., 2011) allowing the researcher to make sense of the data (Denscombe, 2010). Patterns of communication were identified within the posts and, in particular, examples of reflective/critical thinking on an individual and group level. The analysis identified two levels of reflection with a number of categories and sub-categories.

Once the levels were identified, a content analysis was conducted to see which themes/types of reflection were most common in the postings. Table 1 shows the frequency of each of the levels and categories and subcategories identified. This analysis was then used to facilitate a focus group with students who had participated in the discussion forum. The small-scale nature of the project, made a focus group a particularly beneficial mode of qualitative enquiry, not least because of its ability to facilitate open discussion and ability to provide deeper exploration and understanding of ideas, in a way that one-to-one interviews tend not to do (Gratton and Jones, 2004; Dixon and O’Gorman, 2019). Here, the focus group was used as a way to gather insights into the students’ perceptions of the utility of the discussion forum at the end of the WBL placement; it provided an opportunity, in other words, for students to engage reflexively on the process of their ‘reflections’. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis, building on categories (and sub-categories) identified via the content analysis of the VLE discussion forum posts, as outlined above.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### *4.1 Level of engagement and patterns of participation*

Analysis of the Blackboard (VLE) statistics demonstrated that the discussion forum contributed to 68% of the overall WBL module online activity (number of access hits) – which is more than four times the number of hits compared to the announcements area (16%) and communication area (16%). 1465 access hits were made in the period of time taken for the analysis, with a mean of 77 hits per student. 37% of the participants demonstrated relatively high level of engagement (from 53 to 95 hits per person); 52% made less than 40 hits and 11 % (2 students) shown no participation at all. The ratio between access hits and actual postings was approximately 13/1 meaning students demonstrated passive engagement with the discussion forum, mainly reading/browsing through the postings rather than contributing to it. This was supported by focus group findings where approximately three quarters of the students admitted that they visited the discussion forum twice a week, once on Tuesday when the question was posted, and once towards the end of the week to see others’ comments and post their answers.

Since students started their placements at different times (within two weeks of each other), each of the discussion threads remained active, explaining the relatively high number of hits on some of the older threads. The asynchronous nature of the discussion forum helped to



reduce scheduling issues (Stahl, 2000) and also helped with engagement, as identified by one student:

*I tended to log onto the discussion boards late in the evening when I had a bit more time [after work].*

#### 4.2. Types of Reflection

Table 1: Content analysis findings

Reflection category	No. of postings/fragments of postings
<b>L1: Individual Reflection</b>	<b>103</b>
Reflection on experience	
Emotional	30
Value of role/activity	39
Learning outcomes	34
<i>Total</i>	103
<b>L2: Group Reflection</b>	<b>16</b>
Referencing	
Acknowledging	8
Reinforcing	15
<i>Total</i>	<b>23</b>

*(figure by author)*

The content analysis found examples of both individual and group reflection, but individual reflection was dominant throughout all the topics (see Table 1).

##### 4.2.1 Level one: Individual reflection

Individual reflection was found to be the most common in the communication discourse, with reflection on experience as the main category. Whilst the examples are not fully reflexive and critical in nature, they do nonetheless contain elements of reflective practice, which will be discussed in more detail below. While describing their experiences of WBL, students reflected on different aspects of their experience. The most common subcategory identified was reflection on the value of their role, the activities in which they were involved, and on the importance of these activities for their future employability:

*My role is vital in helping plan and organise the national schools tournament... this is very important as it is getting more children involved in the sport.*

*If I show my commitment and drive throughout, hopefully I'll get 'well-in' with the head of PE and he will sort me out a job one day eh!!*

*I am having such an important role within the organisation. I have opportunities to make some organisational decisions, making strategical plans for the organisation's marketing ...*

A lot of individual reflection occurred while students were discussing their weekly learning outcomes or skills developed. It was found that most of the learning outcomes, appearing on the discussion forum, were mainly related to the development of transferable skills (communication, organisational and management skills, teamwork and others); The most prominent transferable skill discussed was the importance of (and intent to develop) organisational skills, as the following postings highlight:

*Since I started my placement, I have got so much information on various things that I have never experienced before. Especially all the contact details about our partners, volunteers and PR organisations. Last week, I spent a whole morning to sort out a database for all the information but it saves me a lot of time now when I need to find something.*

*Hi all, the three main things I have learnt this week is: to use your initiative when things are going wrong, to be organised prior to event, and to not assume that people will always have facilities and equipment...*

Here, students emphasise the need to be able to collate information gathered and to utilise it in a more efficient way so that it can be directly applied to the role at hand and to use their own initiative to do so. This suggests the students clearly evidence a type of reflection 'in and on action' as defined by Schön (1983). Students were, in other words, taking knowledge of skills gained prior to their placements and then reflecting on those elements in order to more fully understand and inhabit their placement roles effectively. Similarly, both problem solving and interpersonal skills were highlighted by students as being key elements of their professional practice:

*I work with a number of different coaches not only my placement provider, this requires me to understand the person for whom I'm working under, and will determine the degree of input I will have. It's all a great experience in understanding different characters (coaches).*

*Learning point is, don't expect people to help you unless you are prepared to put some effort in and gain their confidence!*

The necessity of interpersonal skills as evidenced in these postings represents two key elements referred to above; firstly, the importance of dialogue in the effective co-production of learning within the placements, but also in relation to effective reflection too (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). Students also began to outline their experiences in relation to reflection on the learning outcomes related to the subject of study (Sport Development) too:

*I have had a bit of a crisis this week. The coach at the gym I am placed with called all the student members over and told them that the gym was now too busy for us to go to and asked us all to stay up at [campus] to train. This would completely b..... my placement. I contacted my supervisor today to check things out and thank god, I'm allowed to stay as I'm on placement and not just going down there to train. ....but I*

*think I will use this crisis and the way I handled it as part of my problem solving evidence...*

*I have learnt that it is important to be flexible in lessons for Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) children, and a sense of humour goes a long way as well as setting them personal challenges rather than competing against each other.*

*Last week was quite strange for me as I started to see the difference between state and public schools, how the pupils react differently [to PE lessons]*

Whilst the development of transferable skills can help them to function effectively in the workplace (Jackson, 2015), being cognisant of work-related, transferable skills can also be beneficial in terms on one's own employability (Lemanski *et al*, 2011) with employers placing so much importance on the value of work experience (Fletcher and Cullinane, 2017). This highlights the need to focus on the latter more effectively moving forward to enhance this aspect of the module. At the same time – and as the postings outlined above hint towards – the discussion forum also enabled students to discuss their emotional responses to experiences and the actions that followed too:

*Sometimes I do feel a little out of my depth. By frequently asking questions though I feel that I am slowly becoming more confident and I'm finding out things that otherwise I wouldn't of"*

*... The failure of last year influenced me to do this module to prove to myself and others that I am capable of working as part of a team and individually, as I felt last year people judged me because of my placements falling through.*

*I've found it very difficult when communicating with the adults with learning disabilities because many of them have quite severe speech impediments. Quite often I have to ask them to repeat themselves a number of times and it does make me feel like I'm being rude. Also I've felt that I sometimes patronise some of them with the tone of my voice and questions that I ask.... I think that this placement has so far taught me that I do hold a number of prejudices and preconceptions about these people and I really hope to change a few things, especially my style of communication, during my time at the centre.*

The discussion forum provided students with the opportunity to share, not only their tangible practice-focused experiences, but to begin a discourse around their own subjective experiences from a more personal viewpoint too, offering evidence of moving away from outward focused 'reflection' and towards a more fully reflexive understanding of their experiences too and thereby enhancing the placement's 'meaningfulness' in more depth too (Raelin, 2000). Being able to negotiate these elements more fully enables students to traverse the gap between the two communities of practices (university and WBL) more effectively, and yet despite the reflective skills these postings highlight on an individual level, evidence of wider, group-based reflection on the discussion forum itself, was less immediately obvious.

#### 4.2.2 Level two: Group reflection

Group reflection that did occur, mainly took place in the form of discussions about referencing, with two sub-categories of group reflection demonstrated: acknowledging and reinforcing.

Referencing includes instances where participants commented on each other's posts. The most common form of referencing was reinforcing, where participants did not just acknowledge other's postings, but evaluated or gave a value to them:

*I think Chris has near enough hit the nail on the head there...I also think...*

*Reflecting on what Rob said about meetings I totally agree that full concentration is key...*

*I have just read [a] post and I feel the same about my communication. I have only really had the opportunity to communicate with the people involved in the company...*

*I totally agree with Sam that passing information through a third organisation is not very effective at the community-based level. I have this experience when I tried to promote the Community Games at ...*

This interaction can be a key factor in encouraging critical reflection (Brockbank and McGill, 1998), not only on their own practice, but as evidenced here, applying others experiences onto their own context of practice, highlighting the importance of co-production in the learning process (Morley, 2016).

Acknowledging was the least common form of reflection and involved participants acknowledging other's contributions to the discussion, but without evaluating the content of their posts:

*Just read your post Nick. This week I have...*

There were a few examples of help/support offered (*If anyone is looking for a placement provider in the future, and doesn't mind a bit of a trek, Paul is brilliant...*); seeking for emotional support (*Anyone else started yet and feeling a bit like me?*) and attempts to set up a collaboration (*If anyone on else is at a school in Liverpool we may have extra curricular matches against each other*) resulting from reflection, but they did not provoke any interactive discussions.

However, participants in the focus group highlighted that not all group reflection was recorded in the postings. Three-quarters of the participants admitted that through reading others postings they had a better understanding of what to reflect on and how to go about it, finding it useful to see how others had dealt with situations similar to their own. In some cases, reading through others postings prompted some further discussion and reflection outside of the discussion forum. Looking at early responders' answers/reflections helped to find a starting point and/or to enhance the quality of their postings. Students also reported that reading other's postings gave them a new insight into their own experiences, but normally they did not acknowledge it in their postings. This emphasises the idea that reflection, just like other forms of learning and communication is ultimately generated, informed and enhanced by interpersonal communication (Stahl, 2000).

Both, in the discussion itself and at the focus group, students stated that they hoped to get social and emotional support from the forum, but the support was rather limited and mainly in a passive form (through the self-comparison with problems other students experienced and solutions described).

#### *4.3 Benefits of participation*

Results of the data analysis demonstrated that the discussion forum was useful in helping to facilitate students' engagement in the reflective process. Despite the voluntary nature of participation, nearly 90% of students were involved in the ongoing discussion, bringing their perspectives and experiences, positive and negative, to explore the discussion topics.

A key benefit articulated by the students, in the focus group, was the relevance of the discussion forum to the final assessment. As Student A put it: *...not leaving [reflection] to the last minute, which is good for our portfolio at the end as we will have something to put in it.* More specifically, the discussion forum allowed students to refer back to the postings, when writing their summative assessment, as identified by Student B: *It gives you something to refer back to you might have forgotten about what happened at the beginning of your placement so there is something there from each stage of the placement that you can refer to...* Referring back to their postings also allowed students to identify how they had overcome any issues as highlighted by student C *.....if you have had trouble in the first few weeks you can look back on that and see how you have changed your ideas or whatever.* These reflections highlight the value of engaging with and using the discussion forum as a journal of reflections that can be revisited when developing the summative assessment. It also emphasizes the importance of the immediacy of the postings so that reflections are logged and not 'forgotten'.

#### *4.4 Problems with engagement/non-participation*

The focus group revealed that those who refrained from involvement in discussion (10%), were students either experiencing problems with their placements (delays with start date, task in the process on negotiation etc.) or not seeing relevance of others' postings to their placement situation: *Because they are in a different situation I did not want to comment....*

As the students were responsible for negotiating the times and dates of their placement the placement commencement dates varied amongst the cohort. Yet there were a number of students who had not yet started their placement, but who nonetheless demonstrated engagement from the first week of the discussion: *I am yet to start my placement although I can't wait to get started, I met with my 'boss' who is a sports development officer / PE teacher. He has asked me to redevelop and restructure the outdoor facilities at the school he works... . I am starting soon but need to do research before then (which adds to more work that I have! poor me).*

Regarding challenges of engaging with the discussion forums, students mentioned the following: *Having time to use it [discussion board] effectively - other commitments come first; not having enough time or forgetting to go on Blackboard* and others, and this was supported by the focus group participants, who justified their non-regular/non-active participation by time constraints.

Limited group reflection could be also explained by “unscaffolded opportunities for peer interaction” (Chung *et al*, 1999). In the absence of a full-time tutor/facilitator who is able to give immediate scaffolding and feedback, students themselves did not see facilitation as their responsibility. The focus group demonstrated that students would like to see tutor’s presence in the discussion, helping them moderate and guide the discourse, and this could be additional motivational factor for them to be more actively engaged in discussion. Typically, WBL tutors are academic lecturers and consideration must be given to their workload and subsequent capacity to support and facilitate engagement (Dixon, *et al*, 2019).

## 5. Conclusions

The discussion forum proved to be a useful tool in developing a more reflective approach to WBL. Whilst student engagement in reflection tended to be at an individual level, there was evidence of some group reflection and peer interaction, therefore it can be concluded that the discussion forum went some way towards the development of a bridge between the two identified “communities of practice”, that is, within student placements and the university, by providing opportunities for social learning (Wenger, 1998). Student engagement in reflection included sharing and evaluation of personal experiences, thoughts, actions and learning outcomes - the majority of which largely related to knowledge creation and students’ own personal skill development. Through the disclosure of their own work experiences, the discussion forum was also effective in providing insights into particular professions and job roles. Whilst the students expressed that they benefitted through the sharing of ideas and insights, relatively low levels of engagement and interaction with each other’s experiences meant group reflection within the postings appeared to be on a more superficial level, lacking criticality, with the majority of instances consisting of referencing or acknowledging other postings, as opposed to reflecting on each other’s experiences or providing support.

However, the focus group revealed that some students were involved in more in-depth group reflection that was not evidenced in the posts. Indeed, data from the focus group showed that the posts served a prompt for informal dialogue and reflection amongst friendship groups outside of the VLE discussion forum. This emphasises the need for reflexivity to be a social and collaborative practice (Cunliffe, 2004). A recommendation for the future would be to use a blog or vlog format for the students to post their reflections. This would allow students to upload images, videos, podcasts and graphics, to promote more active engagement and more in-depth critical reflection. Synchronous online discussions could also be considered to further develop group reflection, although timing and availability would need to be key considerations.

The focus group identified a desire for a tutor to be more involved in guiding the discourse and felt this would enhance engagement with the discussion forum and further encourage critical reflection (Brockbank and McGill, 1998). A recommendation is to design the module to make the discussion a core component of the module. This would require additional staff hours to help support and facilitate the discussion forum and therefore staff hours and workload must be taken into consideration. Evident within the postings and as identified by students in the focus group, some students also found the discussion forum valuable in assisting with the module assessment as it provided the opportunity to revisit their previous posts and enhanced the relevancy of the process to the students. This highlights the importance of ensuring that any form of online discussion that is intended to facilitate reflective practice, is explicitly linked to the assessment.

In addition to the advantages engagement with the discussion forum has to the summative assessment it is also important to emphasise the benefits of the process to the student's own employability. Being cognisant of their own transferable skill development (Lemanski et al, 2011), and indeed, being able to articulate this to potential employers may help benefit future employment. To that end, it is necessary that students are made aware of the benefits, particularly as employers place increased importance on the value of work experience (Fletcher and Cullinane, 2017). One unintended but interesting finding from this project was its use in helping monitor the quality of the placement. The nature of the WBL module is such that, to a degree, the student has autonomous management of their placement with limited supervision from an academic member of staff. By asking students to reflect on their duties it is possible to gauge what duties the students are performing on placement and the quality of tasks performed. Although not a key aim of this paper, it is clear that increased dialogue between students and staff through a VLE discussion (Blackboard) is a useful way to monitor placement quality. Furthermore, due to variations in context and quality of the WBL placements, a VLE discussion forum can be used by the academic tutor to manage the placements more effectively, ensuring inconsistencies and issues can be resolved and therefore enhancing the learning experience.



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