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The Development of Work-based learning as Part of Post-Qualifying Education in the School of Nursing University of Salford

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The Development of Work-based learning as Part of Post-Qualifying Education in the School of Nursing University of Salford

Keywords: Work Based Learning, Student Centred Learning, Action Learning, Reflection

The aim of this paper is to disseminate the conception and progress to date of the development of work-based learning as part of post qualifying education in the School of Nursing at the University of Salford. There is a changing culture within the university in relation to the delivery of programmes via non-traditional routes. With this in mind work-based learning is a radical change from current teaching and learning strategies within the school and the wider university. This creative and imaginative approach contrasts significantly with the more traditional methods to teaching and learning in higher education. This paper will briefly report on the development, introduction and evaluation of a work-based learning module at level two as a pilot project. It will then go on to outline the progress to date in the development of a work-based learning degree utilising the lessons learnt from the pilot.

A clear definition of work-based learning is elusive and those who advocate for work-based learning tend to champion their own approaches. What is clear is that work-based learning means different things to different people and organisations. Whatever the interpretation, the common theme sees a departure from traditional forms of learning that are teacher controlled, which provide module content, suggested reading and construction of learning experiences within the classroom and practice to develop the necessary skills to fulfil assessment requirements. Chan (2002) identifies that clinical learning is an integral part of nurse education however he recognises that clinical education can be problematic. As work-based learning is centred around live projects and challenges individuals and their organisations the creation of knowledge is shared and activities undertaken collectively. This type of learning promotes discussion and the sharing of problems and the identification of sometimes imaginative and innovative solutions (Raelin, 2000)

Flanagan et al (2000) describe work-based learning as a means for integrating university level learning with learning from experience in the workplace, the bringing together of self knowledge, expertise at work and formal knowledge. Work-based learning is a learning process rather than a teaching process, which encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning and develops attitudes and skills towards lifelong learning (Chapman and Howkins, 2003). McKee and Burton (2005) identify three dimensions of work-based learning. Work-based learning as part of an academically accredited course, as part of a managed and structured occupational learning programme and as an individual and/or collective responsibility within a work setting.

Integration of theory and practice, which is fundamental to professional education, requires a combination of learning for work and learning through work and in work (Seagraves et al, 1996 and Rounce and Workman, 2005). Raelin (2000) maintains that elements of work-based learning include thinking and reflecting on work practices, reviewing and learning from experience, problem-solving within a working environment and the acquisition of meta-competence – learning to learn. The knowledge process is facilitated through the blending of learning from experience through enquiry relating this experience to existing generic knowledge through learning materials and facilitation. By using an organisations objectives and real work based projects as the focus for academic enquiry, work-based learning is uniquely structured to benefit both the individual employee and the employing organisation whose objectives derive from their business plan. Ramage (2005) believes that work-based learning takes experience as the starting point for learning and therefore the learner takes on a central role in the construction of this type of learning. She found from her studies that work-based learning was valued by students as it taught them how to be flexible in the methods utilised in order to learn, a skill that would facilitate further engagement in lifelong learning.

There has been growing interest in the importance of work based learning amongst both academics and practitioners. As a consequence, the issue of providing learners credit or awards for their learning has become increasingly important for organisations (Prince, 2002). Essentially work-based learning is based on partnership and on negotiation; the role of the academic may be that of facilitator and guide rather than subject expert. This represents a particular challenge for academics as the

knowledge to be developed and presented is not owned by academia but by the practitioner and by their clinical community and this challenge should not be underestimated. This empowerment model concentrates on learning and change and is ideally suited to professional practice and to the development of a better skilled, more qualified and more flexible workforce that is needed if modernisation is to be achieved within the health care arena.

Recognition of the importance of the work-place in learning is not new; indeed the economic and social imperatives of developing a workforce able to deal with technological change have driven educational policy and practice since the 19th century. The National Health Service (NHS) has a history of supporting learning in the workplace for both pre-registrant professionals and some continuing professional educational activities. In the main continuing professional development provision has previously relied heavily on traditional theoretical delivery outside the workplace. Department of Health (2003a) maintain there should be clear links between continuing professional development activities to what is needed locally in terms of individual career aspirations, personal, professional and academic development. Therefore work-based learning is a creative and effective method to meet these needs. Moore (2005) maintains that work-based learning with the advance of information technology could allow more opportunities for the workforce to learn whilst addressing the need for change in order to meet the changing demands of healthcare and the impacts of other external factors.

Peddler (1998) identifies that post-registration education is an important subject and a costly exercise. In June 1992 the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) revised their Code of Professional Conduct. Amongst other things the UKCC made individual practitioners accountable for acknowledging any limits to personal knowledge and skill and taking steps to remedy any relevant deficits in order to effectively and appropriately meet the needs of the patients and clients. The UKCC has been superseded by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in 2004 and this still applies. However, because nurses can experience difficulties getting funding for programmes of study, accessing the university campus, study leave and release on set times to fit with traditional university based programmes. This is mirrored in other health and social care environments where post qualifying educational needs of the workforce are often superseded by service demand. This was identified by Larcombe and Maggs (1991) that equal access to traditional theoretical programmes may be due to the inflexibility of delivery times, resource and manpower shortages are just a few issues that have had a negative impact on meeting the continuing professional education needs of staff. Work-based learning is seen as an original method of engaging these individuals in an educational process that is meaningful to them as practitioners in clinical practice and in turn enabling widening participation to academic study.

The health and social care services are undergoing rapid change and alongside this the workforce is developing and evolving to meet new expectations and demands. National initiatives stress the need for flexible workers and the need to break down traditional job boundaries. The modernisation agenda facing these public services in the future is immense and will permanently change the way in which services are delivered and practitioners are required to work. As a consequence there will be an

enormous impact on service and education providers will need to develop flexible approaches to teaching and learning.

The NHS Plan (DoH 2000), Helping Services to Change Lives (DoH and SCIE 2004) and the onus on 'Working Together, Learning Together' (DoH 2001) demand a new approach to training, development and staff learning and expresses a greater interest in seeking and attaining academic recognition from work related learning. In an Organisation with a Memory (DoH 1999) the need to capture and disseminate the tacit knowledge gained at work is highlighted. The overlap between health services and social care services is becoming increasingly blurred, and the opportunities for staff from both sectors to learn together and learn from one another, must be initiated. Beyond this the introduction of Agenda for Change and the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework (DoH 2004) clearly set out the skills required to move from one post to another. This and other similar frameworks will be the driving force in terms of future demand, from the workforce and from their employers.

The opportunity to develop work-based learning within the school of nursing arose from an approach by the practice area for rehabilitation within a partner Health Care Trust. The practice area wanted their post qualifying nurses to be able to access Higher Education via a flexible route, gaining academic credit, which would allow practitioners to develop practice and so improve patient care. Dearing (1997) discussed the need for Higher Education in collaboration with employers to recognise, assess and accredit learning from work thus extending opportunities to adults who would not necessarily have engaged with further study and so contributing to widening participation.

The school was asked to consider a mechanism by which the variability of skills and knowledge of practitioners could be reduced promoting a learning culture and a means by which staff could initiate change and improvements in practice from within the service. An integral part of the School of Nursing's Teaching and Learning Strategy is to encourage the development of flexible learning approaches, thus enabling learners to maximise their abilities and to identify opportunities to engage in improving outcomes for their communities. Keeling et al (1998) highlight the commitment of the organisation to the education of the staff as a factor that has a significant impact on motivation and the success of work-based learning. Having considered the more traditional approaches to education work-based learning appeared to have the potential to meet the nurses' needs by promoting learning that is practice driven by encouraging the integration of theory into their current practice by enabling them to challenge and make changes that enhance patient care.

From this a Level 2 module via work based learning was developed and piloted using a group of qualified nurses working in rehabilitation settings. The pilot was evaluated and valuable lessons were learned that have influenced further developments of work based learning within the School of Nursing. For example: Teaching within the context of work-based learning places the emphasis on the student's learning rather than on the structure, content and processes controlled by the educator. Information and evidence in the professional development record in some cases was substantive but was not given any academic credit. This issue will be addressed in the development of the assessment strategies for the degree programme.

Building on the success of the pilot the School Executive Committee commissioned a project to discover the feasibility of the development of a part time post qualifying degree via work based learning. Following the dissemination of the findings of the project to the School Executive Committee the decision was made to support the development of the degree programme.

A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was undertaken by the Programme Development Team which consists of academics and practitioner colleagues. Manktelow (2005) maintains that SWOT Analysis is a very effective way of identifying the Strengths and Weaknesses and of examining the Opportunities and Threats you face. He advises that carrying out an analysis using the SWOT framework helps you to focus your activities into areas where you are strong and where the greatest opportunities lie. He maintains that carrying out this analysis will often be illuminating, both in terms of pointing out what needs to be done and putting problems into perspective. The results of the findings from the SWOT Analysis informed the way in which the Programme Development Team devised an action plan and objectives that subsequently influenced the overall design of the programme. Some of key issues arising from this work for example staff development needs, changing organisational cultures, partnerships and collaboration, assessment, award and development of the virtual learning environment.

Buckley et al (2005) recognises the challenge for nurse educators is how to be innovative in the use of on-line discussions to create an environment for participation, interaction and socialisation while also effectively stimulating critical thinking and promoting interactive learning experiences. They maintain helping students develop the skills to participate in a discussion on-line should take place through appropriate orientation in which clear protocols and ground rules for participation are specified. The University has a well established Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) via Blackboard from which students can access a variety of materials, library resources and participate in on-line activities. However in the pilot students were not utilising the VLE to its full potential. The primary reason for this was due to the lack of student's information technology knowledge and skills. Having identified this as an issue greater emphasis needs to be placed on the assessment and development of student's skills in the early part of the programme.

Gray (2001) identifies that assessment methods in work-based learning tend to differ from those used in more traditional teaching. Therefore the programme development team wanted to be innovative in its approach. The students will be offered a choice in relation to how they want to be assessed; the rationale for this is to encourage creativity. Examples of some of the assessment methods include a poster presentation, teaching video and patient journey. The students will be assessed against an adapted criterion referenced assessment grid based on the work of Price and Rust (2001). Following the evaluation of the pilot further changes have been made to the grid to include the assessment of key skills. In conjunction with their chosen method of assessment, all of the students are required to develop a personal development record which is defined by the Quality Assurance Agency in 2001 as 'an individual's personal records of learning and achievement, progress reviews and plans'.

It was identified from the evaluation of the pilot that work-based learning challenges traditional education practice by placing reflection at the heart of the process there by

removing objectivity. Mantzoukas and Jasper (2004) maintain reflection is recognised as a technique for developing knowledge and enhancing practice. However they believe it was embraced by nursing without much contemplation on issues of implementation within daily ward reality. It is hoped that work-based learning will become the vehicle to encourage the nurses to become reflective practitioners and embrace the ethos of lifelong learning. Gustafsson and Fagerberg (2004) maintain that lifelong learning is a prerequisite in a profession that is in constant change, enabling professionals to be prepared for these changes. Burton (2000) believes that lifelong learning by implication reaffirms the necessity for nurses to reflect. However Mantzoukas and Jasper (2004) warn that reflection can run the risk of being accommodated to fit existing cultural and organisational strategies in monitoring practitioners rather than changing these to facilitate the enhancement of knowledge and practice. They maintain that if the organisational culture ignores or deliberately neglects the nature of learning through reflection or does not facilitate and support its use, it is unlikely to become evident in daily practice.

Some the underpinning assumptions for the programme are taken from Seagrave et al (1996) and Rounce and Workman (2005) in that it is recognised that work based learning is the starting point for learning and places the learner in the central role in the construction of this new type of learning. The programme's success will depend to a large extent on negotiations between student, employer and academia about the shape and content necessary to meet respective needs. To encompass the ethos of work-based learning these processes need to be productive and creative. The three key drivers for the programme relate to Debreczeny's work (2002). These are the development of a new challenge that promotes personal motivation, the engagement in a specific and challenging health & social care environment that promotes professional motivation and improving patient & client outcomes that promotes service motivation.

This is mirrored in the ethos of lifelong learning which promotes the value of learner autonomy – learners managing their own learning. Through being able to pursue their own areas of interest. Students themselves determine what they will learn, how they will learn it, what resources are needed, how they will evidence their learning and how they will evaluate the entire learning process.

The main emphasis of this programme design is based upon the work of Betts (1985), Renzulli and Reis (1985) and others who stress the importance of learning experiences, the process of education and curriculum activities that are worthwhile to the students themselves. Learner driven learning is more likely to be effective and meaningful when based upon experiences from which they gain a sense of self worth and achievement. For some students this mechanism for learning will require them to move outside of their 'comfort zone' and be prepared to take risks. MacIntosh (1993) believes that nursing must shift paradigms away from what Friere refers to as the 'banking model' in which Schools of Nursing deposit information in students as receptacles and towards a variety of approaches emphasising empowering students to acquire and analyse information on their own. This may be a new way of learning for students. In order for students to feel safe and secure this model will need to ensure a learning environment that is supportive and yet challenging.

The knowledge process will be facilitated using blended learning approaches from experience through enquiry, thinking and reflection and relating this experience through learning materials and facilitation. Grant (1999) suggests education is not an independent event but one that takes place in a context that depends on the learner, the learning environment and the practice environment. . By using an organisation's objectives and real work-based projects as the focus for academic enquiry, work-based learning is uniquely structured to benefit both the individual employee and the employing organisation. It was recognised by the development team that robust support systems needed to be available to the students. Moore (2005) maintains that partnerships should have a clear vision of the need for rigorous frameworks to be in place to support more independent learning, especially within teams working together to meet the needs of the patient and the organisation. These systems were developed using a multifaceted approach.

Marquardt (2000) identifies that action learning is the most powerful and effective tool employed by organisations. This was mirrored in the pilot. Some of the issues that arose from this were how and where the action learning sets should take place. Therefore facilitated action learning sets are seen by the Programme Development Team as a key feature of this programme and within each individual module. As the action learning sets are designed to support the theoretical work that the students undertake and are a venue for discussion with peers on the programme. Edmondstone and MacKenzie (2005) describe action learning as a method for individual and organisational development based upon small groups of colleagues meeting over time to tackle real problems or issues in order to get things done; reflecting and learning from each other as they attempt to change things. Revans (1980) believes the action learning process is founded on the concept that one cannot change the system unless one is changed in the process. He maintains the change in the system is the action and the change in the individual is learning therefore learning to act effectively is also learning how to learn effectively. Pedlar (1986) suggests the key purpose of the facilitator of an action learning set is to enable each set member to work on and with their own real identified issue.

Support and guidance is available to the students using a multifaceted approach through academic supervision, support in practice and peer support through action learning sets and discussion groups and support via the Virtual Learning Environment and Information Services Division within the University. Students will be allocated an experienced lecturer for support and supervision of their academic work at the beginning of each module. Dewar and Walker (1999) emphasise the significance of on-going academic support in the implementation of work-based learning if the philosophical commitment to experiential learning and student-centred approaches are to be realised. They maintain that the philosophy of work-based learning respects students' ownership over their own learning process and their right to make decisions about the direction it takes. Students will be allocated a practice guide who works in the Trust. This person will be an appropriately qualified practitioner who can support the student in their personal and professional objectives. All students must have the support of their place of work and their line manager as a tri-partite agreement needs to be completed between the student, their line manager and one of the programme leaders. Williams (2003) maintains that using a tripartite approach of practice, student and tutor brings together the assessment of theory and practice and makes the assessment more transparent. Thorne and Hackwood (2002) identify that having a tri-

partite agreement was a very advantageous approach in relation to work-based learning as it promotes a student-centred approach. Student on-line action learning/discussion groups will be facilitated by named academics. Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues with the intention of getting things done. Through action learning individuals learn with and from each other by working on real problems and reflecting on their own experiences.

Drawing on the lessons learnt from the evaluation of the pilot key issues have been addressed in the development of the degree programme. These are the organisation of action learning sets, the student engagement with the VLE and student support and facilitation of learning. Initial developments of the programme are complete and currently the programme is going through the University validation processes. However developments to date indicate that the programme will be well received within the school and faculty and most importantly with our practitioner colleagues. Preliminary feedback from clinical practice areas consolidates the belief that engagement in work-based learning will facilitate creativity within the workplace and encourage lifelong learning.

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