

Industry Facilitates Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Leonie-Mae Tucker
School of Applied Technology Institute, Unitec

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate a collaborative assessment undertaken in a real world situation. In an effort to excite creativity and expose learners to the growing area of retail merchandising display, a New Zealand based organization was approached to seek assistance in providing a context for student groups to develop their skills and meet the learning outcomes of the course in a commercial and public arena. The feedback from a student questionnaire conducted at the conclusion of this project indicates that opportunities for student groups to work cooperatively with industry, encourages learners to develop, interdependence to respect difference in a collaborative group and encourages students to exceed their creative and theoretical learning of the course. The industry participant confirmed that in the case of these projects the students window display were fresh, creative and innovative. The result had acted as stimuli for existing staff promoting a more competitive and enthusiastic approach to the display of the companies merchandise. Tutors may consider during the delivery of a program that students have not related their learning to real practice. If this happens, the students miss out on an important part of the educative learning possibilities within the working environment they desire to enter.

Introduction

When graduates enter the workplace, they are often nervous, unsure and hungry for a mentoring environment. This feeling of anxiety is experienced by all graduates entering the workforce for the first time. To assist with reducing these feelings of anxiety we provide a setting which simulates the work place. The traditional classroom can not replicate the atmosphere or complexities of experiences graduates will face in the commercial arena. Higher education institutions of learning have difficulty acquiring quality resources necessary to re-create a workplace setting to allow students the opportunity to experience working with the type of equipment and products they would be expected to be familiar with in their graduate field of study. A work place setting will bridge the gap occurring between student needs and the resource limitations of the institutions we teach in and our students study in.

Background Literature

There have been several studies written that have shown the positive impact of cooperative education programs and work-based experiences on the academic outcomes of student participants. These studies have investigated a large number and wide variety of indicators to determine the impact of work-based learning programs. These include the theory of constructivism which rests on the notion that there is an innate human drive to make sense of the world. Instead of absorbing or passively receiving objective knowledge. Writings suggest that students actively construct knowledge by integrating new information and experiences into what they have previously come to understand, revising and reinterpreting old knowledge in order to reconcile and apply it with the new (Billett, 1996).

Writings in the field of Cooperative Education for Enterprise Development (CEED) programs have been shown to develop most of all students' personal, communication and learning skills that could be transferred to the workplace (Candy, 1991). Research indicates that work-based learning excites and motivates most students. It usually has positive, albeit small, effects on students' academic performance, graduation rates, and enrolment in post-

R.K. Coll (Ed.)
Conference Proceedings: New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education
Annual Conference, Queenstown, 27-28 April, 2006
(ISBN: 0-473-11263-9)

secondary education, and it has led to full-time job positions for some students” (Jackson & Wirt, 1996). Exposure to actual or simulated workplace tasks and problems allows learners to experience ever-widening variation in knowledge application, and to see the limits to their understanding and how that needs to be addressed; both of these are said to be essential to deep learning and for a capacity to deal with novel situations.(Bowden, 1997). Retention of learning is much greater when it occurs in a real-life context, perhaps because such contexts more readily provide or emulate the four conditions for effective learning: a knowledge base, a motivational context, learner activity and interaction (Biggs, 1999)

The concept of Work-Based Learning has developed from an outcome-driven exercise when universities were preparing students for one job in one industry in one career path. This learning has evolved into a concept of engaged scholarship where students have an opportunity to interact with the community in a multiplicity of ways, thus developing the skills that will enable them to become lifelong learners and community contributors (Eames, 1999). Dickie (2001) recognizes that integrated learning takes initiative, time and energy, but it offers unequalled networking, resources and opportunities for students and institutions alike.

These studies do not raise any doubts about the value of work-based learning. However, it appears that little has been written about the emotional and creative benefits that can be gained in implementing work-based education and collaborative assessment. Furthermore, many authors have conducted their research in discipline areas traditionally requiring a work based component such as nursing, veterinary, and applied trades to this end the purpose if this paper is to outline the learning that occurs when using work-based education within a creative discipline such as Interior Design and Visual Merchandising.

This paper highlights a model where student learning experiences were unable to be replicated in a traditional classroom setting suggesting that cooperative workplace projects for students promotes enhanced learning and provides greater possibilities for students to transfer skills and competencies from academia to the workplace.

Instrument Used

The student groups studying Interior Décor and Visual merchandising were exposed to the theoretical principals of point of sales display, shown photographic examples of quality international retail displays and actively create a number of formative displays within the safe environment of the classroom. The student groups are taken on a number of site visits to familiarize themselves with a wide range retail display examples within the area of Auckland. New Zealand. Following these visits the tutor approached some of these companies requesting a venue for the students to experience planning the concept and displaying the company’s products within their showrooms.

Method

One of Auckland’s most prodigious interior design retail companies generously agreed to allow the students to create a main window display and outlined their client brief:

- Collaboratively the students were required to visit the site to begin their selection of furniture accessories and artwork for a main window display in the showroom
- The groups conducted a measured and photographic survey of the areas provided by the host company. The student groups were required to plan a unique layout for the window display utilizing the furniture and accessories on display within the host company’s showroom
- The color theme for their display required agreement by all members of the student groups
- The students were required to create, install, accessorize and complete the window in a five hour time frame while business continues

- All decision processes must be collaborative therefore the students must develop strategies for effective group work and decision making
- The display is to be of the highest standard in line with the quality display usually presented in this prestigious showroom
- The students work under tight time constraints using the company's expensive international furniture and accessories, and
- Students are exposed to public critique throughout the installation process while business continues as usual.

Host company response:

- The managing director of the company reported that the student display had promoted a renewed competitive spirit within the staff for future displays, and
- Furthermore one student was offered full time employment with the host company.

The tutors mentoring role was as a coach to assist students to become effective members of a collaborative team and to provide opportunities for the groups of students to discover and strengthen weaknesses and learn from their mistakes. Research suggests that tutor/mentor relationship is a strong force in helping students' realize 'peak performance' (Gilson et al., 2000).

This work-based project serves as the basis of this research and demonstrates through a questionnaire, verbal feedback and peer and self assessment the implications for students, supervisors and host companies. The body of discussion for this paper is structured as follows:

- Firstly the course in which the work –based learning has taken place will be described
- The students involved will be discussed
- The task and the procedure the students will execute will be outlined
- The outcome of the project will be described
- The result will be tabled, and
- Finally the conclusions will be outlined.

Applied Technology Certificate (Interior Décor) is a one year program consisting of nine courses. The program is made up of creative practical elements along with sound theoretical research based activities. The course in which the work-based project will take place is Introduction to Visual Merchandising and carries 12 credits with two assessments. The first is a practical assessment and the second a logbook of learning.

Learning Requirements

The Visual Merchandising course requires students' to develop skills to create visual displays for the interiors of retail shops. They are to consider during the course that all design is the manipulation of style, taste, color, tone, shape, form and decoration.

The aim is to create a display which will perform the function of successfully displaying products to increase sales for the company involved. The student groups select and allocate resources to assemble and monitor projects to promote a product for maximum exposure. The interpersonal skills emphasized throughout this course include personal grooming, mental attitude, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, lateral thinking, problem solving, and cultural sensitivity. The students learn to develop techniques which include product knowledge, analysis of client needs, listening skills, dealing with client objections and answering a client brief.

Conducting the practical project and assessment for this course in a work place setting will provide the opportunity for the students to develop and use these skills.

Furthermore, by approaching the delivery of this course collaboratively, the students will learn to respect diversity, develop interdependence, listening skills and encourage the participation of group opinion. In addition the students have the responsibility of developing the criteria for self and peer group assessment and to mark themselves and their peers in a constructive fair and reliable manner. With traditional pedagogy classrooms the teacher is largely, if not exclusively responsible for setting goals, designing learning tasks, and assessing what is learned. However, collaborative teachers differ in that they invite students to set specific goals within the framework of what is being taught and provide options for activities and assignments that capture different student interests, and encourage students to assess what they learn. Zepke et al. (2003, p. 139) provide a reasonable definition: "Collaborative learning engages with diversity, valuing the contributions of all to learning. It values the different types of knowledge brought by learners as well as teachers and helps them develop the interdependence, teamwork skills and personal attributes desired not only in the workforce but in wider society, nationally and globally."

Collaborative group work alters the traditional vocational teacher's role is not to set tasks, but to organize experiences that allow learners to develop their own knowledge and understanding. Using the methods of cognitive apprenticeship, the teacher is a coach who provides guidance that gradually decreases as learners become more proficient, and who models, mediates, diagnoses, and scaffolds. The learning environment should reproduce the key aspects of communities of practice: authentic activities sequenced in complexity, multiple experiences and examples of knowledge application, access to experts, and a social context in which learners collaborate on knowledge construction (Kerka, 1997). In the case of this model the facilitators' role in this process is to set the standards, discuss their work with them, and encourage them to reflect on the quality of their contribution to the group. Tutors offer regular feedback, acting as a mentor to guide, if and when guidance is required.

The formative practical assessments conducted during this course provide the opportunity for student's to develop the necessary skills for the planning and implementation of a variety of display concepts. These displays are produced initially within the classroom, an effective and safe learning environment to assist with the development of the students' confidence. Each formative and summative assessment will be self and peer group graded to encourage each student to critically reflect on group members contribution. This process of marking for formative collaborative group assessments will help to develop the students' comprehension of this type marking process and the importance of fair and reliable, marking criteria. The next section describes the summative assessment event involved in this course.

Practical Display Group Assessment

1. Students are required to create a display in a retail showroom
2. Identify and investigate the procedures and processes necessary for successful project group work
3. Demonstrate effective organizational skills
4. Deliver the finished project in the given time frame
5. Balance the importance of both the procedure and success of the project while meeting the demands of the clients brief, and
6. Undertake self and peer assessment.

The collaborative practical assessment will be peer group and self assessed. The principles of the marking criteria are outlined and the students contribute to the format and reflect on those criteria the students feel are important in their group work. The students were guided to (Zepke et al., 2003). A successful and uncomplicated example of an achievement based marking grid to aid them in this process. The criteria are classified into four main

sections. Each criterion has separate characteristics that contribute to the overall mark for those criteria. The separate characteristics act as a guide to grading. The individual scores for each criterion is then totaled (maximum of 32 marks per person) in the boxes below. Each participant is given the opportunity to offer justification for the grades they give to each member of the group (and themselves).

During all formative and summative assessments the students will apply this marking method and the tutor will observe the students in the development and installation of practical work. The observation grade will represent 28% of the final 60% grade (Table 1):

TABLE 1
Example of students collaborative marking criteria

Criteria	1-3	4-6	7-8	Self	1	2	3
WORK							
Contribution	Minimum	Average	Excellent				
Preparation	Contribution	Contribution	Contribution				
Involvement	Poor Preparation Not involved	Satisfactory Preparation Fairly involved	Excellent Preparation Fully involved				
ATTITUDE							
Motivation	Unmotivated	Motivated	Highly Motivated				
Commitment	Uncommitted	Committed	Highly Committed				
Listening	Poor Listener	Good Listener	Excellent Listener				
Support	Unsupportive	Supportive	Highly Supportive				
INPUT							
Participation	Inadequate	Adequate	Exemplary				
Planning	Poor Obstructive	good	excellent				
Creativity		Constructive	Highly constructive				
COHESION							
Respect	Disrespectful	Tolerant	Highly respectful				
Fairness	Unfair	Fair	Extremely Fair				
Consideration	inconsiderate	Considerate	Outstanding Consideration				
			Possible TOTAL (32)				

Justification of grades

Person Comments =

1

2

3

Self

The groups develop ideas for their formative displays and install their concepts over five weeks in a safe classroom environment. Following each installation the groups will self and peer group assess the results of the installation. This section focuses on the students involved in this work-based learning opportunity and their experiences leading up to and throughout the practical summative assessment of the course.

The students attend this course Monday to Wednesday for six weeks duration. At the beginning of the course the class of 12 were required to form themselves into three groups of four and remained in these groups throughout the course. The student groups worked collaboratively on all their formative projects leading up to the work-based project. A group example for this work place project consisted of four students of mixed nationality and gender: Student (1) from China, student (2) is European, student (3) a Pacific Islander and student (4) is from South America.

All the students have different views and tastes and despite this must work together as a collaborative group, respecting diversity and celebrate ownership of this real world project. Evans and Kersch (2004) suggest that when conducting real world learning assessments: "The role of the academic supervisor is essential" (p. 63). In the acceptance of these principals in this application of a real world learning and assessment project it is clear that academic supervisors must serve as the interface between students and clients. This requires the tutor to utilize higher level management skills not typically required in classroom settings. The central issue in conducting real world learning experiences is that students frequently require encouragement, direction and support while still being given the freedom to fully comprehend and execute the scope of the project.

This section describes the scope of work involved in these practical assessment projects and outlines the events during the installation. One of Auckland's most prestigious interior design retail companies generously agreed to allow the students to create a main window display and host company outlined their client brief. Firstly the groups were required to survey the designated area, select appropriate furniture, artwork, accessories and lighting from within the showroom to create a full room set for the companies high profile window display. The objective of the project is to display the furniture and complementary products in the showroom. An important part of the client brief stipulates that the display must be executed in a five hour time frame while business continues with staff and customers present throughout the process. Prior to the assessment project the group had been taken to view previous professional displays in the same window; and they were conscious of the high standard they were required to meet or exceed. This unique opportunity allows the students to familiarize themselves with merchandise from six top quality ranges of international furniture from Europe and the USA along with fine artwork and accessories also sold in the showroom. Following their initial selection, the area where the display will be installed is surveyed by the students. Collaboratively they begin the planning, and concept for the space. It is essential the students develop strategies for effective group work and decision making to reach consensus. The display had to be of the highest standard in line with the displays usually presented in this prestigious showroom and the members of the group reported feeling apprehensive as they began to work with the quality merchandise. The students were aware of their responsibility to handle these expensive items with maximum care and attention. However, as the project progressed and developed, their nervousness abated, and they realized this opportunity had heightened and contributed to a better appreciation of quality and style.

Very quickly the teams discovered the importance of effective group work and consensus. The group set their own goals to comprehend and develop their own understanding of the brief and take ownership of their project. While the display took shape I observed the collaborative team working, while taking a comprehensive photographic record of the displays development.

Results and Discussion

The students successfully completed the window display and we met at a coffee bar next to the host company and recapped on the morning's experiences. The group agreed that their greatest challenge was overcoming their anxiety to create a display that was new, fresh, and innovative as well as being desirable and successful in terms of product promotion for the host company. They unanimously reported this work-based project had strongly contributed to a better understanding of product display principles learned in the classroom and described the opportunity as "unique, and the collaborative assessment experience, challenging, inspirational, reflective interactive and student centered."

The client joined us for a brief time and declared he was extremely impressed and delighted by the result of the student display and the students received recognition and accolade for their efforts from both the host company and the viewing public. The learners demonstrated that they need to accomplish tasks and solve problems in real life situations. It is clear from this experience that adult learner's see the learning process as one in which they can raise their competence in order to reach their full potential and to apply tomorrow what they learnt today. A follow up student questionnaire, and feedback from the host company contributed toward the conclusions drawn from this pilot project and the implication for the future. Following the assessment projects each of the three student groups were required to answer a questionnaire (appendix).

The result of the student responses overwhelmingly confirmed that the practical assessment event greatly enhanced their creative and theoretical level of learning. Through their active collaborative participation, students were able to acquire practical knowledge and apply their learning. Notably, they reported they had gained better understanding of the realistic demands they will face when they enter the workforce and the group collaboration requirement of the project was by far the greatest challenge. Additional contact hours were required to conduct such a project. Firstly, to identify appropriate hosts to conduct work based assessments, along with mentoring and overseeing the project. The host company's written feedback stated that they were pleased to have the opportunity to identify talented prospective employees from the students involved in the project. At the conclusion of the exercise the host company offered full-time employment to one member of the group.

The managing director believed the students had raised the bar for his display staff and had injected greater enthusiasm and creativity for future displays. They expressed a keen interest to encourage closer links with academic institutions and to provide future contexts for students to develop and learn from real world experiences. These statements are consistent with the writings of Comeford and McDowell (1999): "Employers continue to recognize the benefits of providing students with related experience" (p. 3).

The outcome of work-based projects, such as the one outlined, demonstrates this is an effective way to introduce and prepare students to the realistic demands of industry. The students overcame their anxiousness and enjoyed this real world learning experience and expressed feelings of pride and achievement at the final result. The result of this project exceeded both tutor and student expectation and demonstrated learning and retention was at a higher level than usually found in typical classroom group activities, confirming beliefs that tertiary education students appreciate learning which takes place through experience. Learners need to accomplish tasks and solve problems in real life situations. It follows that adults see the learning process as one in which they can raise their competence in order to reach their full potential and to apply their learning.

The planning and execution of assessment projects in commercial settings have different demands and responsibilities to classroom projects. However, the rewards of meeting learning outcomes and client needs through collaborative projects culminate in higher student achievement and learning application, which amply justifies the challenges. This is the fourth project the tutor has conducted of this kind and recognize one day work-based projects of this type are at the lower end of workplace learning and am aware of the potential constraints for future projects. The results of the student questionnaire demonstrated

that collaborative group work does not suit all students. Two of the 12 students stated that they would prefer to work independently and found it difficult to with group decision making.

Conclusion

Creative fields such as interior design, tend to promote an independent and highly competitive individual. However, the student who found group work compromising concluded that the experience had helped her develop as a person, to recognize that the opinions of others are valid and the support offered by the members of the team invaluable. Indeed she admitted that the final result far exceeded her individual capacity. Furthermore some students could find public exposure, time constraints and pressure to produce a quality result overwhelming and stressful. Larger student groups could also limit the number of industry related venues and opportunities for work-based experiences in this field. As mentioned earlier a project of this nature will be successful only if the tutor has established a sound relationship of trust with both the student and the host company. The company would not have permitted unsupervised students to handle thousands of dollars of fine merchandise without certainty of their products safety and success of the room set display. Ultimately the tutor has the responsibility of liaising with the organizations and ensuring the final result is to the companies liking and no damage to the merchandise occurs.

Research from this project shows that a collaborative approach to tasks will help creative independent practitioners realize the value and validity of a team in real world projects, suggesting that this is excellent preparation for students entering this industry. People, who lack the ability to work collaboratively with their peers, could find that acceptance of their work contribution, their creative worth and professional development is limited.

References

- Biggs, J. (1999). Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does. Buckingham, Open University Press/SRHE.
- Billett, S. (1996). Towards a model of workplace learning: The learning curriculum. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 18(1), 43-58.
- Bowden, J. (1997, April). Competency-based education: Neither a panacea nor a pariah. Paper present at TEND97, Abu Dhabi.
- Comeford, J., & McDowell, M. (1999). Planning for a quality workforce. Paper presented at the 11th World Conference on Cooperative Education, Washington, DC. Cooperative Education Association and World Association for Cooperative Education.
- Dickie, L. (2001). Externships, internships and mentoring: Partnerships for crafting connections and building opportunities for professional career experiences. Paper presented at the Australian University Alumni Council Conference.
- Eames, C. (1999). Learning in the workplace through cooperative education placements: A longitudinal study. Paper presented at the 11th World Conference on Cooperative Education, Washington, DC. Cooperative Education Association and World Association for Cooperative Education.
- Evans, K. & Kersch, N. (2004). Recognition of tacit skills and knowledge: Sustaining learning outcomes in workplace environments. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16(1-2), 63-75.
- Fletcher, J. (1991). Field experience and cooperative education: similarities and differences. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 27(2), 46- 53.
- Gilson, C.P.M., Roberts, K., & Weymes, E. (2000). Peak performance: Business lessons from the world's top sports organizations. London: Harper Collins.
- Garavan, T., & Murphy, C. (2001). The cooperative education process and organizational socialization: A qualitative study of student perceptions of its effectiveness. *Education & Training*, 4(6), 281-303.
- Howard, A., & England-Kennedy, E.S. (2001). Transgressing boundaries through learning Communities. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 36(1), 76-82.
- Jackson, G., & Wirt, J. (1996). Putting students to work. *Training and Development*, 50(11), 58 -60.
- Kerka, S. (1997). Constructivism, workplace learning, and vocational education. Retrieved May 12, 2006, from <http://www.google.co.nz/search?hl=en&q=KerkaGoogle+Search&meta=>

Zepke, N., Nugent, D. & Leach, L. (2003). Reflection to transformation. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore.

Appendix

Question 1

Do you believe this contextual assessment in collaboration with industry has been beneficial to your learning?

YES	NO
12	0

Question 2

Do you feel your experiences have aided your theoretical comprehension of the subject and course outcomes?

YES	NO
12	0

Question 3

Would you consider more work-based experiences beneficial to your learning?

YES	NO
12	0

Question 4

Did you mind working outside of your normal contact learning hours?

YES	NO
0	12

Question 5

What is your view of the end result?

Highly rewarding	Good	Disappointing
10	2	0

Question 6

How would you describe your experiences of working collaboratively?

Enjoyable	Satisfactory	Difficult
9	2	1