

Transformative education: Bridging the gap between college and career

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Introduction

Changing employment patterns and changes in the organisation of work have impacted on the demand for higher level skills. Employees are expected to be more flexible, have a broader range of skills and be better able to manage their own career and development.
(*The Higher Education Academy: Work Based Learning – Illuminating the Higher Education landscape, p9*)

As a result of the Leitch Review (2006) and the current economic climate, student employability is higher on the education agenda than ever before and to furnish students with the appropriate transferable skills, information and experience, education providers need to develop both strong links with employers and a good understanding of the key skills sought by employers.

It might be assumed that this agenda is inevitably going to be highly instrumental, and will have little to say to the development of human potential or the free growth of individuals. I want to argue, however, in this research study that pedagogic theory with a humanistic perspective has an important part to play in influencing work based learning and employability skills education, as it is developing in the UK. Indeed, without bringing humanistic values into this field, we run a terrible risk of losing the fullest human and developmental dimensions of education.

The report that follows is of a small-scale action research project aimed at improving the experience of students taking a second-year University course entitled *Engaging With Industry*. The aims of the course are to enable students to:

- Identify their career ambitions within the context of their own personal skills and attributes, and to assess their employment or self-employment prospects through engagement in research and analysis of their chosen industry
- Integrate appropriate transferable skills to their ideas for employment (e.g. self management, team work and planning)
- Encourage students to understand and respond to the needs of industry through work based learning and demonstrate an appropriate level of professionalism, recognising the value of self-assessment, self-promotion and networking.
- Reflection and evaluation of experiential learning and work based learning skills

Starting ideas and orientations

As this has been my first ever piece of action research, I needed to begin by understanding exactly what an action research approach entailed. A good description is given by Argyris and Schon, who describe action research as ‘a form of social practice which integrates both the production and use of knowledge for the purpose of promoting learning with and among individuals and systems whose work is characterised by uniqueness, uncertainty and instability’. Certainly this would be a good description of my, and my students’, situations!

It soon became clear to me that there were three main themes or areas of study underpinning the subject of employability: work based learning (WBL); peer learning; and transformative learning. In this project I argue that a student needs to engage with all three of these to create the optimum chance of employability.

The problems commonly associated with WBL are not new. How best to apply theory to practical work and vice versa has been on the agenda since the early days of apprenticeships but now, with the growth of Foundation Degrees (which are usually two year programmes, normally equivalent to the first two years of a degree), it is a rapidly developing area for educational research.

As my reading developed, a series of links started to form between the three key areas of interest. Firstly, Joseph Raelin (2000) argues in *A Model Of Work Based Learning* that the ‘acquisition of meta-competence – learning to learn – alongside new knowledge and technical knowledge is one of the defining features of WBL’. This set up the initial connection in my mind between WBL and personally transformative learning. David Boud also identifies a link between peer learning and

the learner's significant development of 'a repertoire of skills and strategies designed to foster lifelong learning in the student'. Similarly, Candy, Crebert and O'Leary also make the link between peer learning and life long learning citing 'peer assisted and self-directed learning as the first of five teaching methods in undergraduate courses that encourage graduates to become life-long learners as well as helping them develop reflective practice and critical self awareness'.

All of this pointed me in the direction of the importance of learning to become a reflective practitioner, the importance of which arose in countless texts regarding life long learning.

Boud, Cohen and Walker define reflection as a generic term to describe the 'process involved in exploring experience as a means of enhancing understanding. Reflection is essential because it is the means by which experience can be turned into action'. Mezirow, too, discusses the relationship between self reflection and transformative learning, and Cranton and Wright support this by stating that 'transformative learning theory is based on the idea that we construct personal meaning from our experiences and learning companions validate that meaning through discussion with others'.

Through reading journals, books and media, I have been able to find a series of interconnected themes – all of which act as road signs on the way to employability. Each element however is dependent on the others being present in order to be effective.

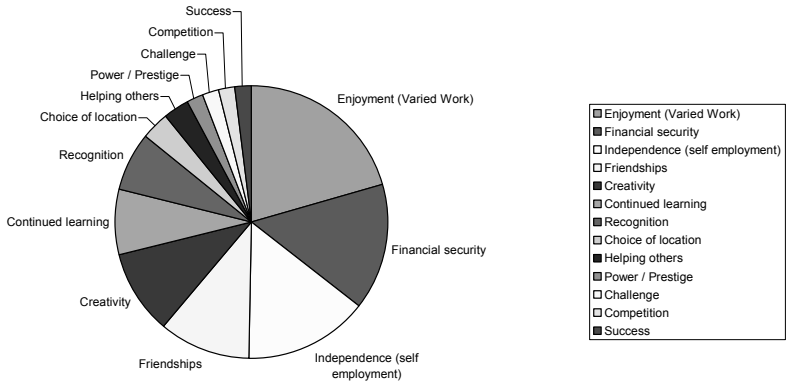
Personal skills for employability

In an initial focus group with students, the overall theme arising from the responses was one of them wanting to be more actively involved in their learning. When asked about the impact of meeting high level music industry guests in class, the students responded with comments like: *Get guests to be more involved with what we're doing, like help us with press releases for our bands* and *Get some ex-students in who've done well for themselves to tell us how they did it*. These comments immediately opened up the issues of the desire for active learning and the need for peer learning.

The next stage of research was a questionnaire where I asked my students about their career values. I thought this was one of the most interesting sets of results. For young students at a rock music college it would be easy to assume that students would want fame, money, and success, however it was their creativity and quite simply their desire not to be tied down to a 'normal 9-5 job' which drives them.

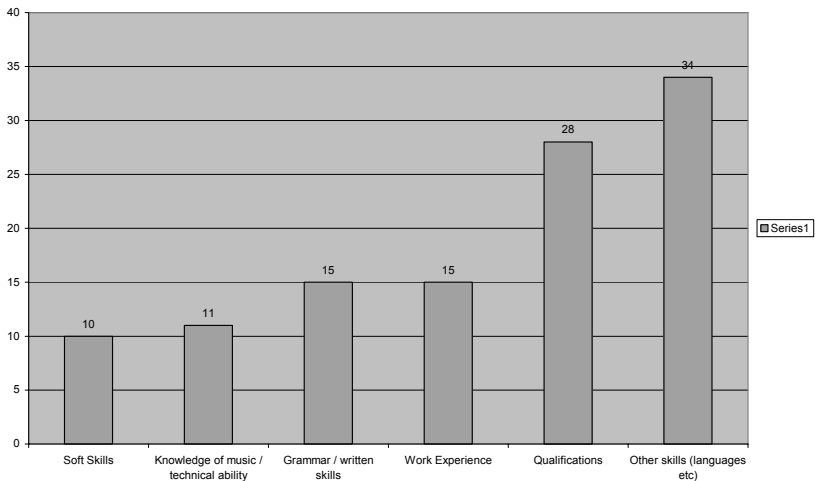
Student – Career Values Questionnaire.

Career Values



Further action research carried out with employers was then very useful in terms of focusing my attention on two core areas for further research; the importance of work experience (WBL) and of ‘soft skills’.

When asked to rate the following categories in order of importance with 1 being the highest, the following responses were given (in the table below, a lower score therefore shows a higher level of perceived importance):



These results closely mirror those found in a larger-scale CBI survey on 2009. Soft skills were viewed as the most important factor in a potential employee, followed here by a passion for and knowledge of music, with written skills and previous experience close behind.

The classroom project

The outcome of the background research is clear with a concise conclusion: employers place a high value on social/soft skills and work based experience; students themselves identify many career goals/values which require social/soft skills; and work based experience is of high value.

Having this information then led to the desire to build a practical and theoretical framework to form a bridge for students between what happens in the classroom and their eventual employability.

My challenge as an education professional was to help my students to personalise their learning from their WBL experiences and to develop their own sense of a professional identity. I decided to address the 'challenge of integration' via the development of co-operative learning in class and of reflection-in-action. Effective and meaningful work based learning is an essential part of the 'employability mix' but effective teaching and learning strategies in the classroom are the key to unlocking and unpacking this learning.

Peer learning and Peer tutoring

Nancy Falchikov suggests in *Learning Together* a series of possible peer learning exercises, some of which would be ideal for the Engaging With Industry group. I have found many of these to be very easy to implement in class, and also highly effective. One example is the '3 step interview' where students interview each other in pairs to learn the opinions and ideas of the other on topics introduced by the teacher. The students then report back to the group. Obviously this develops communication skills and is a useful tool for developing trust between group members.

Term two of the course is based around students' own oral presentations, with students sharing their work experiences and what they have learned from these. It is characterised by some really interesting, amusing, often impressive presentations using lap-tops and visuals, music and hand outs. However, in the past these presentations have often been followed by a total lack of spontaneous questions

or feedback from the rest of the class. I tend to jump in and fire questions to the student. So, we introduced a simple and useful teaching and learning activity in the form of structured peer feedback, where students engage in reflective criticism of the work or performance of other students using previously identified criteria, and supply feedback to them. Students were given a clear structure to follow, being asked to identify one strength and one suggested improvement for each presentation. Attempts to initiate this kind of work in the classroom have been received very well by the students and produced very positive results. At the end of the course many students said that they had been able to use the feedback from their peers effectively.

In term 3, the scheme of work allows for a term of visits from industry guests with time for student questions, but again these are rarely forthcoming as students sit in awkward silence at the end of guests' presentations. Another useful peer activity we introduced (also inspired by Nancy Falchikov) was a 'think-pair-share' exercise, where students can discuss individual responses to a question posed by teacher (or in this case a guest speaker) before sharing these with the whole class.

When this method was tried out in class, there was a very positive response. In one session, students were invited by a guest music teacher to break into groups and suggest ideas for how to teach music notation on a staff to very young children in ways which would engage and entertain. Many of the ideas suggested were really interesting - including 'musical twister'! Some were adopted by the music teacher for his own practice but more importantly the whole class really engaged with the activity and the guest.

A second example was when a guest broadcaster from national radio played examples of two unedited radio interviews with Robbie Williams and Noel Gallagher from Oasis. The challenge posed to students was to act in pairs as Radio 1 editors and decide which parts of the interview were unfit to broadcast. Some candid references to prolific drug use were obvious, but there were many other interesting, more subtle, issues to consider and the session was ultimately a productive media training which received positive feedback.

Throughout the module, there are many obvious opportunities to introduce peer tutoring. Falchikov explains that peer tutoring will 'encourage critical thinking, improve metacognitive skills, encourage students to reflect on their experiences, to analyse their roles as tutor and evaluate their own performance'. The fact that each student has had their own individual experience of WBL means that bringing

that learning back into the classroom and tutoring their fellow students would be an appropriate teaching and learning activity. This will hopefully achieve the aim of empowering the students and increasing learners' autonomy. This in turn is likely to improve student motivation.

Transformative Learning

A learning companion's role is 'fostering transformative learning' (Cranton & Wright) and a learning companion is 'one who helps the learner to recognise his or her own expertise and experience and draw on that'. The aim is to 'encourage a shared curiosity and engage in an exchange of learning so that the perspective of both educator and learner are enhanced'.

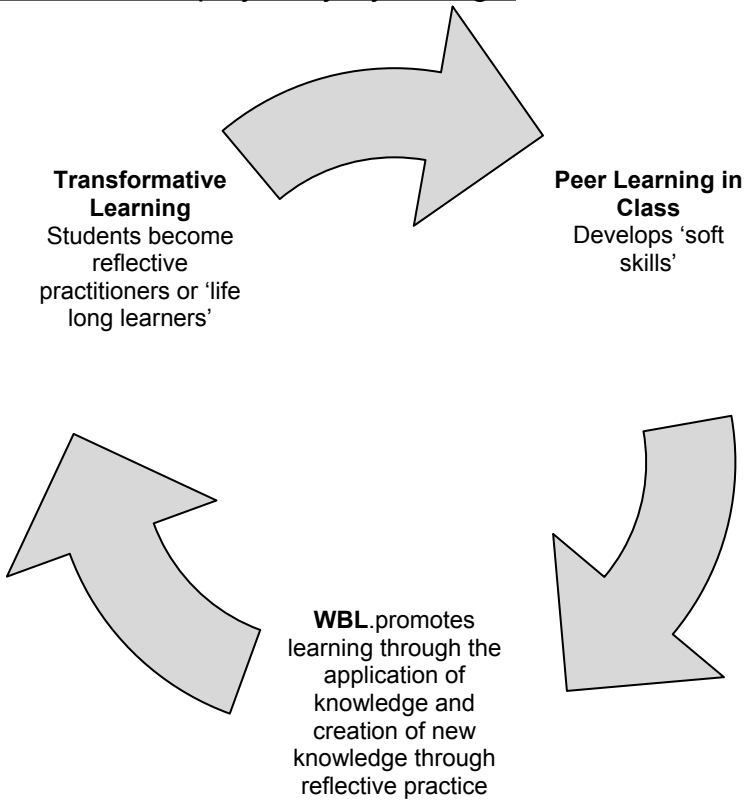
Cranton and Wright have developed the concept of being a learning companion rather than a 'teacher' or 'mentor', and discuss the importance of the educator-learner relationship where the educators work with the 'whole person' creating a safe environment, building trust and fostering self discovery.

'Traditional transformative learning has critical reflection and critical self-reflection at its centre' (Cranton & Wright). I hope that by introducing effective peer learning into class where students act as learning companions for each other then transformative learning can take place.

My own model

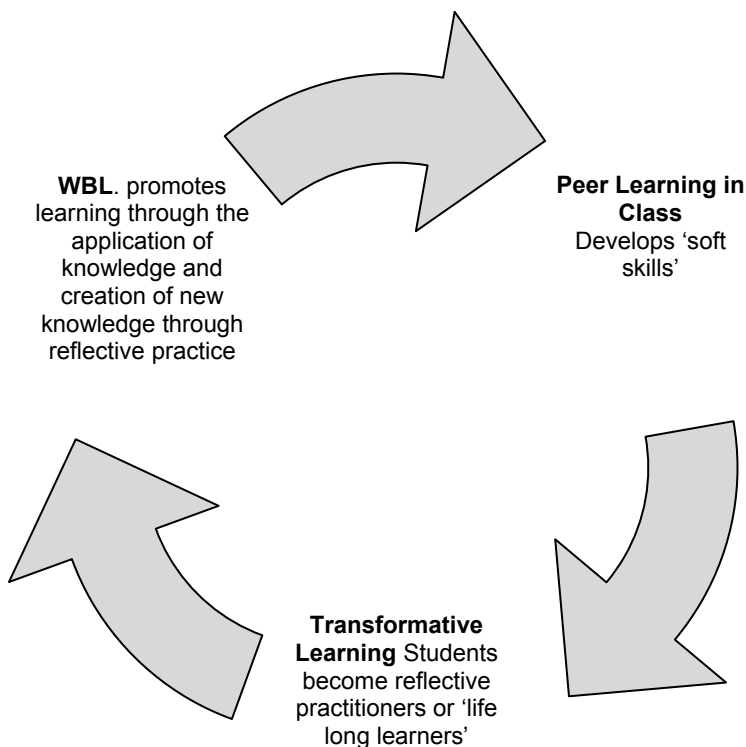
The model below is my first attempt at a visual representation of the findings of this action research, with reference to changes in my teaching methods (specifically peer / co-operative learning which will lead to a development of soft skills, those personality led skills which are held in such high regard by employers). These skills are then truly utilised and developed further during work experience and WBL where the abstract theory of the importance of these skills can be really appreciated by learners who can then return to the class room, re-contextualise their experience within a community of learners through the presentations and activities listed above and, through this process, start their journey to becoming transformative or 'life long learners'.

Education / Employability Cycle. Fig 1



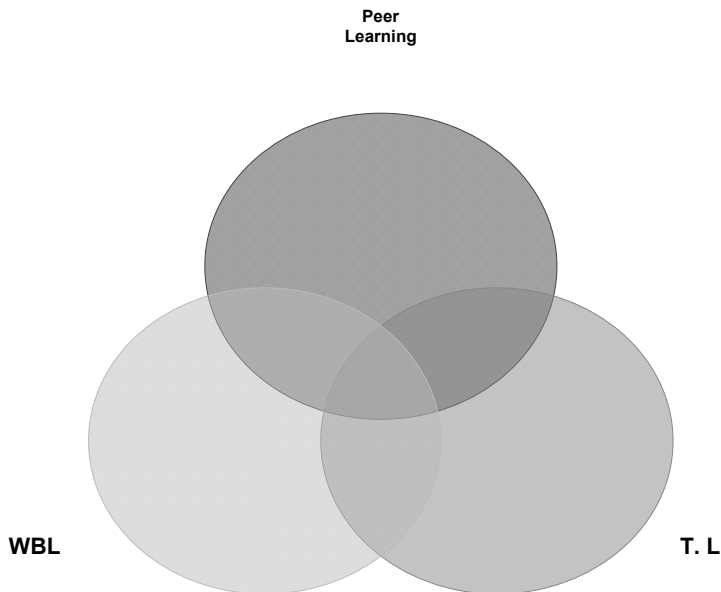
This model was then re-worked as I considered Mezirow's claim of a direct relationship between peer learning and transformative learning: 'When students are present in class and a community of learning is engaged in collaborative learning, the environment is created for transformative learning'. This is a theory of deep learning or a 'route to the development of critical thinking'. Boud too supports this argument that peer learning leads to transformative learning so I considered the question 'Is the cycle running in the wrong direction?'

Education / Employability Cycle. Fig 2



I found that this cycle could also be criticised as the problem lay in the fact that all three factors need to be working together, there is no order or sequence of events to move through in order to develop our ultimate goal. As Raelin points out, transformative learning is a feature of work based learning, one does not necessarily lead to the other. It is therefore more likely that the following model would be a more realistic view of how the module can facilitate personal autonomy and the development of employability skills in a student.

Education / Employability Chart . Fig 3



TL (Transformative Learning): students become reflective practitioners or 'life long learners'

WBL (Work Based Learning): promotes learning through the application of knowledge and the creation of new knowledge through critical enquiry and reflective practice

Peer Learning in Class: learning from and with each other; taking responsibility for own learning; developing confidence and key 'soft skills'.

The section at the centre, where all areas overlap is where the students assimilate all their learning and start to become 'desirable' employees according to the findings of our employer research. It is vitally important that all three areas are built into the very foundations of the Engaging With Industry module.

Ultimately, what I hope to be able to instil in my students through this educational experience is an expanded sense of self and of possibility. Poet and transformative educator David Whyte says, 'Teaching is about asking [people] to remember who they are'. Developing a sense of self, or becoming authentic, can be in itself a transformative

experience, and it simultaneously leads to further transformation and further authenticity in a kind of spiral of learning.

The music industry is state of flux and the job of preparing students for employment in the shifting sands of this volatile industry seems at a glance to be a tough one. However the results of this research are positive and encouraging. There are some areas which I have always viewed as obstacles which I now see as opportunities - such as the issue of having very large teaching groups. I now feel that this is a chance for me to experiment, to test my role as a facilitator, and encouraging students to view the rest of the group not as an 'audience' but as a resource has proven to be useful.

One of the greatest satisfactions gained from completing this piece of research is that I undertook it in an action learning set, with other teachers who were also trying to improve their own practice. I have enjoyed the experience of working with the rest of the group (including the course leaders) in an exceptionally effective and enjoyable learning environment.

There are many elements of this learning environment which I hope to replicate in my own class rooms including: the feeling of trust in the room; the lack of negative competitiveness; the lack of fear; the feeling of support amongst group members (again including the course leaders); the principles of respect and good conduct communicated by actions rather than words; and the positive tone set from our first meeting.

I also feel that rather than hope to be a mentor, acting as a 'learning companion' is a more realistic title – especially given the epistemological assumption that knowledge is always in process so it is impossible to create final answers. But if transformative learning is the process of constructing knowledge through critical reflection on an experience then it would be fair to suggest that this project has set me up with the necessary skills and motivation to carry on as a life long learner myself, and to try to inspire my students to do likewise.

Meleri Thornton is Head of Work Based Learning at the Brighton Institute of Modern Music. Her role sees her using contacts generated from over 13 years experience in the music industry to generate work based learning opportunities for students as well as helping them with their career planning, and personal and professional development.