Influences on student learning:
'It was the people around me, the people I met'.

Jenny Fleming, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Chris Hickey, Deakin University, Australia

Abstract

Fundamental to cooperative education is a philosophical commitment to learning through the experience of work. The workplace can be viewed as a social environment and provides a context for learning that is very different from that provided within a university. The aim of this research was to explore the influences on student learning in a sport cooperative education context. Through an interpretive case study the data presented brings into relation the voices of the students through their perceptions on the cooperative education experience. It was clearly evident that learning in the workplace was influenced by the direct guidance and support given by industry supervisors. Students also learnt by observing the actions of co-workers and through being shown and told what to do by their colleagues or supervisor. However, it was through social interactions, meaningful discussions and developing relationships with workplace colleagues that students were able to learn both the procedural knowledge (the know how) and the dispositional knowledge (the values and attitudes) that contributed towards deepening their contextual understanding of what it means to be a professional in the sport and recreation industry. The findings conclude that supervisors and students need to be attuned to the learning opportunities that occur within the social context of the workplace. To enhance the learning experience, academic supervisors need to prepare students so that when they enter the workplace the students are active in seeking and nurturing meaningful discussions with their workplace colleagues, and these are not just simply left to chance alone.

Key Words: Workplace learning, supervision, cooperative education, work-integrated learning

Introduction

Fundamental to cooperative education is a philosophical commitment to learning through the experience of work. The workplace can be viewed as a social environment and provides a context for learning that is very different from that provided within a university (Hughes, 1998). Through the cooperative education experience, when the two environments become integrated "the learning experiences are most likely to be generative of robust and critical legacies" (Billett, 2009, p. 829). While learning is not the fundamental aim of most workplaces it is through participating in the authentic activities of the host organisation that students can learn in different ways and gain access to different types of knowledge. In order to be able to better prepare students for their cooperative education experience it is important to understand more about learning in the context of the workplace.

The workplace or host supervisor is generally considered as having a major influence on learning in the workplace (Billett, 2001; Cooper, Orell, & Bowden, 2010). The roles and responsibilities of the workplace supervisor have been described as complex and multifaceted (Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2012) and vary with the placement structure and discipline context. Workplace supervisors can be considered as making a contribution to the learning process through negotiating and managing the allocation of appropriate tasks and responsibilities that facilitate learning; role modelling; and providing direct guidance, support and feedback to the student. Recently several studies have highlighted a lack of clarity and understanding of the roles and expectations of the workplace supervisors (Patrick et al., 2008; Rowe et al., 2012) and this has the potential to impact on the quality of the learning that can be gained through a cooperative education experience.

While the supervisor has a significant role to play, the influence of the physical and social environment is often overlooked as contributing to student learning. Vygotsky (1978) considered that the social environment and the way that learners interacted with other people and objects within that environment were critical for learning. Drawing on a socio-cultural perspective of learning, the student as a learner in the workplace is understood to be 'situated' in a social context, undertaking authentic activities alongside practicing professionals in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Knowledge can be accessed through interaction with a variety of people within the workplace wherein cultural knowledge (shared ways of knowing and being) is distributed across the community of practice (Salomon &

Perkins, 1998). Through mediated action the socially and culturally derived artefacts, such as language, stories and other meaning making devices, which constitute the everyday practice of the workplace are then shared between workplace colleagues and the students (Eames & Bell, 2005).

Much of the research on the influences on learning in the workplace has been conducted in contexts whereby the learner was employed full-time (Billett, 2001; Eames & Bell, 2005; Eraut, 2007). While it was likely there would be many similarities, it was considered important to gain an understanding of the influences on learning in the context of university students undertaking part-time, unpaid cooperative education placements. To this end, the aim of this research was to explore the influences on student learning in a sport cooperative education context. The data presented here brings into relation the voices of the students through their perceptions on the cooperative education experience.

Context

The context for this study was a cooperative education programme within the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR), at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The purpose of the cooperative education programme is to provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge and theory they have developed through their course to workplace settings. In short, the cooperative education program seeks to develop a range of vocational aptitudes and competencies that will make BSR graduates more attractive to future employers.

The cooperative education programme within the BSR involves students undertaking 350 hours of placement within one sport and recreation organisation over two semesters, each being fifteen weeks in duration. The placement is generally undertaken two days per week as a capstone programme during the final year of the degree. Within this arrangement the cooperative education experience makes up half of a full-time programme of study in the final year of the BSR. Students attend university classes for the other half of their load during this time. Through this concurrent placement structure there is an expectation that the insights and experiences gained by students during their work placement are integrated into their university-based programme (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma, & Coll, 2010).

Students are supported in their cooperative education program by an industry supervisor and an academic supervisor. The industry supervisor is expected to negotiate appropriate work related activities with the students and to provide guidance, support and feedback in the workplace. Complementing this, students are expected to meet their academic supervisor on a regular basis (ideally every two weeks) for one-to-one mentoring. A key role of academic supervisors is to encourage students to share their reflections, critically analyse, and make meaning from their experiences. Academic supervisors also provide comments on student's online journal and give feedback on assessment tasks.

The study

An interpretive case study approach was used to generate rich insights into the experiences and perceptions of the students (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are a very common approach used in research in the area of work-integrated learning because of the highly contextualised nature of such programmes (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Linn, Howard, & Miller, 2004). A case can be defined as a phenomenon occurring within a bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study the case was defined as the cooperative education programme within the BSR. A case study design draws the researcher to what is important about that case within its own world and aims to amplify recurring issues and themes from within the specifics of the case (Merriam, 1998). Using this approach Stake (1995) argues that case study researchers can generalise the themes generated through their case to inform other and future settings. Further to this, readers are invited to arrive at their own conclusions and generalisations.

The primary data, to investigate the aims relevant to this research paper, was gathered as part of a larger study that sought to investigate the stakeholder perceptions of the BSR cooperative education programme. While the larger study explored the perspectives of students, workplace supervisors and academic supervisors, the focus of this conference paper is on the voices of students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, individually, with six BSR students who had completed their cooperative education experience and had met the requirements for completion of their degrees. Students had undertaken their placements at a range of workplace settings with non-profit organisations in the sport and recreation industry. None of the students

interviewed had worked full time in the sport and recreation industry prior to their cooperative education experience. Some, however, had undertaken volunteer roles such as coaching or assisting with event management activities. All students interviewed had completed the minimum 350 hours of industry placement and none had been paid by their host organisation during this time.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and as part of the larger study were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994), using NVivo 9 software. One of the major themes identified from coding the main data set was 'influences on student learning'. Emerging from this theme was a second order theme 'people interactions' that will be the focus of this paper. Pseudonyms were allocated to the participants and have been used in the reporting of the findings.

Findings and discussion

In line with a socio-cultural view of learning, the student perceptions are situated within the specific context of the unique experiences that each of them has had. However, there were key influences on learning that were consistently voiced by the students. The quality of industry supervision, the nature of the activities and the motivation of the student were key themes identified. These are no different to the influences on workplace learning identified from research conducted in contexts where the learner is in full time employment either on placement or in a permanent position (Billett, 2001; Eraut, 2007).

It was worth noting in this study that students frequently commented on the learning they gained from the people around them and the people they met. It was often the support from a 'helpful colleague' that was considered to have influenced their learning the most. The focus of this paper stems from these comments and explores the influence of people interactions in the workplace on student learning.

The workplace was seen as a social environment where students worked alongside athletes, trainers, coaches and administrators in sport organisations or teachers and support staff in school. Students commented that initially they were able to learn through listening to and observing the actions of the more experienced staff. Working alongside others helped students to gain access to tacit knowledge and to learn the behaviours that were part of the workplace culture. Steve felt that through working closely alongside teachers in a school he was able to gain an understanding

of "the way of a professional [teacher], their standard of dress; way of speaking; way of writing." In this context Steve was able to then learn the 'tools' (Vygotsky, 1978) that are part of the everyday practice of the profession.

Supervisors and co-workers provided access to the procedural knowledge that was often 'hidden' and would be difficult for a student to learn without assistance (Billett, 2001). For example, Sean learnt first from watching and following the high performance trainer (the 'expert') as well as other work colleagues. He described the way he learnt:

> When I was first there I was obviously in the corner, I did not want to interrupt.... I learnt by me following them, getting to know everyone, because it is quite hard being a new person in the industry that is already established. They have already established what they do, their routines that kind of thing and for someone new coming in, it can be quite difficult.... In the first few weeks I was just following and eventually I started to get more involved, it came gradually and by at least halfway through the year I was more part of the team.... I took on a key role as an assistant trainer.... and then had a free licence around the gym.

Sean's comments are an example of the importance of 'getting to know' and interacting with workplace colleagues. Sean as a 'newcomer', started as a legitimate but peripheral member of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Initially he was watching and following other staff who were modelling (Bandura, 1977) the 'way of doing things'. Slowly over time, as he became more proficient he was given more responsibility. As he became part of the team, it was then that he moved closer to being a full participant, which enabled him to become enculturated into the community of practice (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Eames & Bell, 2005; Eames & Coll, 2010) and take on a specific role as an assistant trainer.

The conversations and interactions with their co-workers were acknowledged as contributing to the way in which students were able to reflect on and make meaning from their experiences and gain access to procedural and dispositional knowledge. As Sally mentioned, "talking about my experiences with others, talking about what I was doing and how I could do things better, helped me to learn". Susie described the ways she learnt:

How I learnt was by asking questions and talking to people. Initially I was

told what to do and then left to do it on my own. As I progressed they started

to ask me what I thought.

Initially more experienced workers provided Susie with support through allocating her work and answering her questions. This illustrates the notion of 'situated cognition' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where Susie was drawing on the resources of the environment and expertise of her colleagues. Through talking to others she was able to access specific knowledge that was situated within the context of where she needed to apply that knowledge. As Susie became more competent she was left on her own to work independently. As time progressed she gained the trust of her colleagues, moved towards developing recognised expertise and then was invited to share her experience and knowledge with others. Supervisors and co-workers need to be able to assess whether students can be trusted with the tasks and responsibilities that will allow them to develop and learn.

Developing a good relationship with others in the workplace enabled students to be more comfortable to ask the 'silly questions' of their co-workers rather than their supervisor. Students are often in a position where they want to impress their supervisor with their abilities rather than reveal their inadequacies. Students may be seeking a reference or employment with the organisation at the completion of their placement and the supervisor is generally required to complete some form of appraisal or feedback on the student's performance. Hughes (1998), points to a potential conflict of interest in the student supervisor relationship and considers that the role of a supervisor as a facilitator of learning is often problematic. Encouraging workplace colleagues to be part of the learning process seems a positive solution to this conflict.

As the students became involved in tasks of increasing responsibility they acknowledged that it was often through the feedback from their co-workers that they were able to compare their own performance with what was the expected standard. As Sally mentioned, "as my confidence grew I started asking others, trying to gain more feedback from others". However, students needed to be critically engaged and aware that the so-called 'experts' did not always model best practice. While a critical awareness is important for learning, students are often placed in a difficult position where it is not appropriate for them to openly challenge the accepted practices of the workplace.

Developing personal connections and relationships with staff both within and outside their own organisations were also seen as a valuable part of the cooperative education experience. Susie acknowledged the importance of personal relationships and developing friendships with other staff, which was welcoming and gave her a sense of being part of the organisation:

> They were just so welcoming… they made me feel comfortable, they became our friends, we would chat to them about the weekend when they asked, but you knew when to do your work. They definitely made you feel part of the team… I feel I have gained so many relationships, although it is a small thing, that is your foot in the door.

Sean also valued the networks that he had made within the industry as evident in his comments about his experience:

> So getting out there, getting to know people in the industry so that when you do finish you are not just stuck with a degree and nothing else…. Just being in [the organisation] as much as I could I ended up meeting most of the staff and some of the external staff that come in for certain roles. I knew what I wanted to do…. and this kind of opened the door for me.

Sean felt that the through his time in the workplace he was able to make key connections and for him this provided the ultimate benefit in that he was able to "find his way into the industry".

Conclusions

It is not disputed that learning in the workplace is influenced by the direct guidance and support given by industry supervisors (Billett, 2001). Yet, there is generally little acknowledgement of the role that others in the workplace play in influencing student learning. In this study, the voices of the students illustrated that learning occurred in the workplace by observing the actions of co-workers and through being shown and told what to do by their colleagues or supervisor. However, it was through social interactions, meaningful discussions and developing relationships with workplace colleagues that students were able to learn both the procedural knowledge (the know how) and the dispositional knowledge (the values and attitudes) that contributed towards deepening their contextual understanding of what it means to be a professional in the sport and recreation industry.

The findings of this study have painted a positive picture and highlighted that the workplace environments where the BSR students were placed were seen to be supportive of student learning. This may be a factor of response bias and the students that had a positive learning experience were more likely to volunteer for this study. Importantly, we must acknowledge that some workplaces are contested environments. Learning through interaction with workplace colleagues may not always be feasible when there are cultural and hierarchical constraints or where there is a lack of understanding or willingness of the co-workers to support the student learning experience. It is suggested that further research is undertaken that gains the perceptions of how workplace colleagues understand their roles and contribution to the workplace as a learning environment for cooperative education students.

We conclude that although the role of the industry supervisor is critical in the learning process, all stakeholders need to be attuned to the learning opportunities that occur within the social context of the workplace. We suggest that industry supervisors and students need to be aware that the quality of learning can be enhanced through increasing the opportunities for students to have meaningful interactions with workplace colleagues. Supporting student learning in a cooperative education placement needs to be a responsibility that is shared across the staff within the host organisation and not left to the industry supervisor alone. We also suggest that academic supervisors need to prepare students so that when they enter the workplace they are active in seeking and nurturing discussions with their workplace colleagues, and these are not just simply left to chance alone.

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