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# The Role of Situated Learning in Shaping Talent

*Craig Wight*

## Learning objectives

Work based learning (WBL) is an increasingly popular mode of situated learning that is based on an emerging paradigm that considers learning through experience to be the foundation for tacit knowledge. This chapter reports on the findings of exploratory research undertaken during the academic year 2011-2012 on students studying hospitality management degrees at Plymouth University. Qualitative research was undertaken to make sense of student perceptions of situated learning in Food and Beverage Management at stage five of three hospitality management based programmes.

The paper introduces three organising themes and a set of recommendations to enhance teaching and learning strategies and to offer some insight into the role that this kind of capability-building can play in fostering talent amongst graduates on hospitality management programmes.

At the end of this chapter you should have achieved the following learning outcomes:

- Be able to analyse the underlying philosophy of situated learning in the development of talent within an education setting.
- Have an awareness of the type of work based activities that can be built into a hospitality and tourism curriculum.
- Critically analyse the benefits that a situated learning approach brings to both students and employees.
- Consider a whole new approach to the hospitality and tourism curriculum in higher education settings.

## Introduction

Early literature concerning pedagogical advancements in Higher Education (HE) has argued that the knowledge necessary to perform useful work cannot exist purely in the form of a body of information to be learned (Raelin, 1997). Work based learning (henceforth WBL) is an increasingly popular mode of situated learning that is based on an emerging pedagogical paradigm that considers learning through experience to be the foundation for tacit knowledge (Foster and Stephenson, 1998). The Higher Education Academy (2006) suggest that changing employment patterns in organisations have impacted on the demand for higher level skills such as flexibility and problem solving, and WBL is a response from HE institutions to equip graduates with the skills sought by industry.

This paper, based on interpretivist thematic research, explores student perceptions towards industry based situated learning experienced by a group of level 5 (stage 2) continuing students studying Undergraduate *Food and Beverage Management* as part of a wider, hospitality focussed programme of study at Plymouth University. Qualitative research was undertaken, based on a combination of two rounds of cross-sectional interviews (undertaken at the outset, and then again at the end of the academic year 2011–2012) with a focus group interview during a period of retrenchment, that saw a model of learning enrichment based on contributing to the operation of a training restaurant replaced with a new model of WBL to connect students with local enterprise. The research had the ultimate aim of producing a set of actionable recommendations designed to strengthen the approach to WBL as a central element of two food and beverage management modules in subsequent years. It is therefore a body of work that is produced with the specific intention to inform future practise in this area, certainly at a local level, and potentially at a broader level and it offers implications for the shaping of talent amongst undergraduates. These aims are achieved through the development of a thematic network that identifies three overarching or organising themes that are then used to form recommendations to enhance future academic practice towards the delivery of an efficient and comprehensive food and beverage management module developed around fostering talent. Specifically the study sets out to add to knowledge in the field of WBL as an enrichment strategy for learning about food and beverage management in hospitality. It therefore explores perceptions of work based pedagogical enrichment based on the first hand experiences of students enrolled on a work based learning module. As such, the study locates and analyses the perceived value of situated learning amongst a cohort of food and beverage management students who are required to develop skills and talent in hospitality management to enhance their chances of employability.

The motivation to undertake this research stems from a recent repositioning of learning strategies within the Tourism and Hospitality School at Plymouth University. Whereas the traditional model of learning saw students interact in

an artificial trading environment, the university increasingly advocates the value of forming partnerships with local industry to produce students who are fit for 'practice, purpose, award and the world of work' (Plymouth University, 2012). This research provides some evaluative reflection over the success of this strategic repositioning as it applies in practice. Although WBL is accepted as 'the new frontier' in learning enrichment in the micro-environment of Plymouth Business School, there have been no attempts to date to carry out in-house research to support, and indeed to evaluate the idea that such a mode of learning adds value to the student experience and encourages talent. The paper begins with a discussion of contemporary concepts of situated learning before taking a closer look at this pedagogical approach in the context of vocational degree teaching, and in the terms of hospitality and tourism through the primary research undertaken.

## Towards an understanding of work based learning

Boud and Garrick (1999) were amongst the first authors to note of educational institutions a trend towards engaging with the 'world of work' using ever more sophisticated approaches. Indeed the authors acknowledge the central proposition of learning as an aspect of any given career trajectory, since learning has historically been accepted as something that prepares people for work, yet it is increasingly acknowledged as the 'lifeblood' which now sustains it. The visible strands of the political and educational discourses that have emerged alongside these trends manifest as terminologies such as 'lifelong learning' and 'continuing adult education'. Bailey *et al.* (2003) suggest that WBL, if it is executed with care, can play an important role in strengthening the educational preparation of young people. To offer an overarching definition, based on an analysis of multiple suggestions (Boud and Garrick, 1999; Foster and Stephenson, 2006; Johnson, 2010; Rowley 2003 and Reeve and Gallagher, 2007), it is accepted by most that situated (or 'work based') learning is a transition-led strategy to support young people who have already chosen an occupational direction. It is an induction to a 'community of practice' (Bailey *et al.*, 2003) that is experienced to varying degrees through a pedagogical lens that orientates students within the workplace. In practical terms, WBL sees students undertake work experience over an agreed period of time with an employer external to the university with a view to completing some scheme of assessed output; usually a reflective analysis or evaluation against set criteria (Korthagen, 2010). Typically, the expectation of the academic is that WBL will form a major aspect of the student's studies and will offer them an opportunity to apply theory to practice (Rowley, 2003:131) by enhancing their skills and talent in the critical evaluation of theory based on the insights of its application to work, and by encouraging them to use theoretical concepts and models as a lens through which to make sense of the organisation. Such an approach also supports students in preparing an assessed output that demonstrates analytical ability in linking theory with practice. In terms of the assessment of WBL outputs, Costley and

Armsby (2006) note that the underlying purpose of this type of learning strategy should dictate the approach. Subsequently, assessment criteria are usually based either on a subject discipline or on generic work-based abilities. The context of the unit of analysis for this research is WBL rooted in a specific subject discipline which sees students immersed in commercialised food and beverage production and service operations.

In a food and beverage management context, WBL is about connecting students with experiences in commercial catering operations. The process of managing WBL is a challenging one, even when the student has been comprehensively prepared and briefed, and it is an initiative that depends on strong support in order to succeed. Indeed, some students have struggled with the application of theory to work, and others with the necessity to come up with a research strategy to collect and analyse data (Rowley, 2003). Self-reflection, particularly in writing and structuring an evaluation or assessment of a WBL experience also present difficulties for students. Indeed, Kirschner *et al.* (2006) note that instructional approaches delivered with minimal guidance have historically been considered to be less effective and efficient than approaches that place a strong emphasis on guidance. Crucially these authors identify that two assumptions underpin instructional autonomous learning approaches: they challenge students to solve 'authentic' problems or develop complex knowledge in applied settings in which they are challenged to construct solutions; and they presuppose that knowledge can be effectively acquired through experiences based on the observation of theory in practice. Regardless of these complexities, Rhodes and Shiel (2007) note that enquiry and evaluation skills are nonetheless explicit in all forms of WBL since participants are ultimately required to engage in a learning process that requires some engagement with practice, theory and context. Discovery learning is therefore keenly implied and, as such, must be supported and facilitated with an appropriate level of support and guidance.

In terms of the learning theories that support WBL, it has been suggested (Johnson, 2010) that any WBL approach needs to develop upon surface and deep learning (which encourage background reading and reflections over relationships with the topic and subject matter) towards a model of 'discovery learning'. The latter approach advocates that the principal content of what is to be learned is not provided by the teacher, but is instead 'discovered' by the learner. The centrality of the approach is therefore that the learner is active in the process. The related notion of Gestalt-insight theory (that insists the brain is holistic with self-organising tendencies) describes an active role for the student who develops new knowledge by appreciating the whole conceptual pattern of what is to be learnt (Johnson, 2010). Crucially, work experience must be related to some underlying problem which is puzzled over by the autonomous student, and the degree of this autonomy will depend on the level of the award that it is attached to (Savery, 2006). Such experiential learning should involve the definition of a problem and some analysis and understanding of the problem along with the generation of possible options to solve the problem (Cusins, 1995).