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# Enhancing Learning for Early Years Foundation Degree Students: Empowerment through Heutagogy and Reflecting on the Notion of Knowledgeable Others

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and Tanya Richardson<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small-scale practitioner enquiry undertaken with 17 work-based learners studying on a two-year Early Years Foundation Degree programme in a higher education institution in England. The first aim of the enquiry was to identify the perspectives of a cohort of work-based Early Years Foundation Degree students on teaching strategies they experienced at a higher education institution in the English midlands. The second aim was to identify how the findings could be applied to curricular and andragogic enhancements for future students. Beliefs and attitudes questionnaires were administered to the students half way through their programme. Findings indicate that students valued strategies that included the direct input of the lecturers they regarded as 'more knowledgeable others' (Vygotsky, 1978), yet they rated peer support as less effective for their learning. Findings indicate that early years students' applications of learned theory to work-based practice may need to go beyond a singular notion of 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although these students are positioned and position themselves as more knowledgeable others in their own workplace communities, they regard themselves as lacking knowledge in their higher education community. As members of these various communities, they straddle heutagogic and andragogic approaches in their respective communities of practice. In recognition of this, the paper argues

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that not only should higher education lecturers working with work-based students adopt andragogic strategies but they should also promote heutagogic approaches that increase student autonomy. They should also communicate explicitly to their students the value of such strategies for learning in the field, both in theory and practice.

**KEYWORDS:**

Early Years Foundation Degree, work-based learning, andragogy, heutagogy, more knowledgeable other, communities of practice, knowledge creation

## **Introduction**

This paper reports on practitioner enquiry – insider research – that was carried out as a way of ‘enquiring by the self into the self’ (McNiff, 2010, p. 5) so that action could be taken to improve students’ experience during a two-year work-based Early Years Foundation Degree (EYFD) programme. Writing this paper affords a rare, and therefore precious opportunity to reflect more in-depth on one’s teaching. As such, critical reflection, which cultivates ‘perspective transformation’ (Wang & King, 2006, p. 3), is part of an academic’s daily work and forges the connection between teaching and scholarship along with academic worth (Nicholls, 2005).

This small-scale exploratory study recognises the connection between research informed practice and practice informed research. The enquiry was carried out with two aims: firstly, to identify the perspectives of a cohort of work-based Early Years Foundation Degree students on teaching strategies they experienced at a university in the English Midlands; and secondly, to identify how the findings could be applied to curricular and andragogic enhancements for future students.

This small scale but ‘real world’ (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 201) research reiterates two key features of teaching practice. The first concerns the responsibility all teachers have to self-evaluate and to critically reflect on their practice; the second acknowledges that teaching is a lived experience which draws from the daily interactions with students and fellow teachers within multiple contexts.

In pursuit of the project aims, the research questions were:

1. What andragogic strategies do students find helpful for enhancing their learning at Higher Education (HE) level?
2. What strategies do students find most useful to help them apply their theoretical learning to enhance their practice?
3. How can employed strategies be improved to meet the learning needs of future students in the study context?

This article considers the ways both theoretical and practical knowledge are co-constructed and shared across the different contexts of work and study by early years work-based students. It is argued that lecturers in higher education institutions working with work-based Early Years Foundation Degree students should adopt both andragogic and heutagogic approaches to learning and that they should communicate explicitly to their students the value of such strategies for learning in the field, both in theory and practice.

### **The context: work-based learners on the Early Years Foundation Degree Programme**

The higher education institution where this research was conducted is a new English university with a long history of providing vocationally based courses with strong local connections. Part of its offer includes Foundation Degrees (FDs) in early childhood education and care. In the United Kingdom, Foundation Degrees were introduced in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2001 following Blunkett's speech 'Modernising Higher Education' (2000). Underpinned by 'the twin drivers of widening participation for social inclusion and increasing participation for economic competitiveness' (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004, p. 6), Foundation degrees were developed to provide vocationally-based knowledge enabling students to go into employment or to develop their practice if already in employment. Usually 2 years full-time and 3–4 years part-time, Foundation Degrees are provided by universities or in collaboration with Further Education colleges to provide Level 5 qualifications (UNESCO, 2011). In some cases, students who complete the Foundation Degree successfully are offered the opportunity to progress to a full BA (Hons) or ordinary degree at Level 6 (UNESCO, 2011).

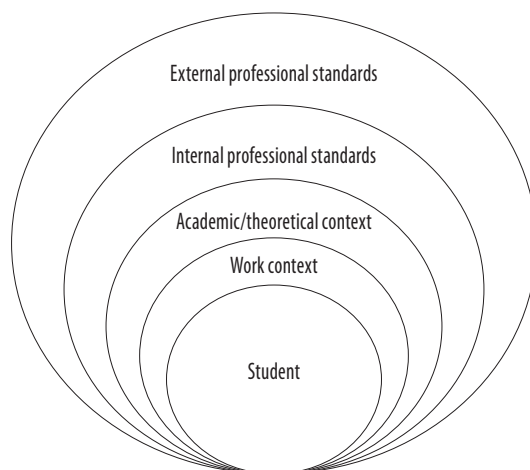
Students entering the Early Years Foundation Degree (EYFD) course are engaged in work-based learning, for which universities and work organisations operate in a symbiotic relationship to accommodate learning in both a programme of study and in the workplace (Basit et al., 2015). The programme aim of the present study context was:

...to provide engaging, critical and stimulating learning opportunities for students employed in relevant early years settings to develop a culture of continuous personal and professional development and practice improvement; thereby to contribute to raising standards in early years settings' (Higher Education Institution, 2019).

Key elements of the programme aimed to develop students' knowledge and understanding of early childhood within diverse cultural and inter-agency contexts and to enable students to acquire a critical understanding of relevant theories and research

and their implications for practice. Early Years Foundation Degree students on this course are experienced practitioners, supervisors or managers of early years settings in England, therefore in prime positions to influence practice in the workplace.

The design and planning of the Early Years Foundation Degree was based on the experiences that students brought to their studies and could be framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model applied to work-based learning**

The innermost circle represents the personal values and experiences students have, which they bring to their studies (Gosling, 2016). This is set in the context of their workplaces providing them with professional experiences that are varied in nature and often depending on the quality of the provision they offer to children. The next layer represents their academic studies at the higher education institution, which is interdependent on individuals' work experience. Academic programmes are governed by internal and external professional standards (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2015), and as they represent the macro-system, they influence the inner layers and consequently the experiences of lecturers as well as students in a higher education context.

The study presented here focused specifically on the 'Understanding Child Development' module, the aim of which is to develop students' understanding of key theories to enable them to make connections with work-based practice via child observations and enhance their understanding of the holistic nature of child development. Andragogic strategies applied include a series of interactive lectures, which introduce and develop students' knowledge and understanding of significant theories in the field (for example, Piaget, 1926; Vygotsky, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Chomsky, 1957) and to help them apply these

theories to their practice. Small group work and seminars help students to consolidate their understanding and to develop their skills in child observation.

### **Conceptual framework: understanding adult learners**

As Figure 1 above demonstrates, work-based students learn in various related contexts. They belong to more than one community simultaneously, including: communities of practice in their own and their peers' workplace, communities of learners at higher education institutions and communities of inquiry in both of these contexts. The various contexts are more conducive to certain ways of learning, therefore, we have drawn on four interrelating concepts that provide a framework for interpreting and understanding the perceptions of work-based learners in this small-scale study. These concepts are: (i) situated learning in communities of practice, learners and inquiry (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004); (ii) andragogy (Knowles, 1970), (iii) heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000), and (iv) the notions of knowledge creation (Nonaka et al., 2000) in relation to 'the more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978).

In Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, the central concept is communities of practice, where learning takes place and knowledge is applied in meaningful contexts, which makes the learning process relevant and responsive to the learners' needs and motivations. Communities of practice are where groups of people learn together and from one another in meaningful contexts through investigating real-life problems they share (Pyrko et al., 2019). Wenger (1998) also recognised that communities of practice interact, and they are dependent on each other's practice-based knowledge, therefore situated learning is rarely local to their own communities only. These boundary encounters between communities of practice led Wenger (1998) to introduce the concept of 'landscapes of practice', which is highly applicable to higher education and work-based learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014; Pyrko et al., 2019) and this present study context. Creating knowledge is contextualised and implicit in communities of practice. This knowledge is also referred to as 'practice wisdom' (Oi-Ngor Cheung, 2016, pp. 259–162) and is strikingly different from learning in a formal set up within an educational institution. Here, learning becomes decontextualized with the added pressure on students having to make their learning and gained knowledge explicit to their teachers and peers so it can be "visible" to everyone. However, it is when theoretical knowledge is situated and applied in communities of practice that knowledge becomes useful and takes on significance (Lave and Wenger, 1991), it becomes 'knowing' (Barnett & Coate, 2010).

Collaborative learning environments also nurture communities of inquiry (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), which in turn support deep learning through critical reflection

and debate (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). According to Garrison and Anderson (2003), communities of inquiry have three key components: (i) the social and (ii) cognitive domains of learning and (iii) teaching presence. The sense of belonging to a community is nurtured through both social and cognitive engagement between the members and teaching presence has a dual aim: to manage the learning environment (valuing both work and campus-based environments) and to facilitate higher order learning. Work-based learners, by nature, belong to more than one learning community, which are interconnected, networked communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014).

The next two concepts, andragogy and heutagogy, denote two distinct approaches to learning: andragogy refers to self-directed learning and is associated with adult learners, whereas in a heutagogic approach the learner of any age engages in self-determined learning.

Knowles (1984, p. 43) originally defined andragogy as 'the art and science of helping adults learn' and identified key characteristics of the adult learner as well as roles for the adult educator. He asserts that an adult learner is self-directing (dependent on the tutor temporarily) and practical, therefore more meaning is constructed through experience and active engagement as opposed to passively through transmission. Another characteristic is that an adult learner is goal and performance-oriented where what is learnt is used for 'life-application' (Knowles, 1984, p. 44). Finally, an adult learner brings prior experiences and knowledge, as rich resources, to the learning process. These characteristics attract the facilitative roles of the educator in relation to creating a learning climate that is enabling and aligned to the needs of adult learners. The educator involves the learners, first, in the self-diagnosis of needs, then in the planning process and conducts learning experiences in a way that allows the 'learning-teaching transaction' (p.48) to be a shared responsibility of the adult learners and the educator. The evaluation of the learning process, or the 're-diagnosis of needs' as Knowles (1984, p. 49) prefers to call it, is also a key role for the educator, for it reinforces the notion that learning is a continuous, cyclical process.

Self-determined learning, or heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon, 2000), has its roots in andragogy and is characterised by self-directiveness in the way information is sought and knowledge is constructed (Chacko, 2018). Heutagogic learners are highly autonomous in defining their learning trajectory and they develop capacity and capability that prepares them for the complexities of their workplace (Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Blaschke, 2012). Halsall et al. (2016) claim that a heutagogic approach appears to ensure excellent student experience and they see it to be a contemporary mode of teaching and learning in the highly competitive higher education sector. Simply put, heutagogy extends the andragogic approach and expects a greater degree of autonomy and maturity of skills and capabilities of the learner. Its potential is truly realised when students are at a distance from their higher education institutions (in their workplace, for

example). In an andragogic approach the tutor guides the learner in seeking appropriate information and relates that information to the learner's work experience, by which he helps the learner see its relevance (McAuliffe et al., 2008). A heutagogic approach, on the other hand, supports transformational and emancipatory learning (Merriam, 2001). Learning is a proactive process fuelled by prior experiences, where the tutor – although providing some guidance and resources – hands over full ownership of the learning path to the student (Hase & Kenyon, 2000, 2007). Heutagogy has a link to the concept of communities of inquiry in that it requires the learner to be reflective through self- and collaborative reflection. Reflective practice affords greater control and fuels motivation to learn (Canning & Callan, 2010).

The fourth concept is discussed from a social-constructivist view, which assumes that knowledge is not transmitted but co-constructed through and across activity spaces, and that the authority of the 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) shifts as participants in the learning activity share and co-construct new knowledge as an outcome of their interactions (Lave & Wenger, 1991.) Partners in learning are not simply interacting but they are also interdependent (Newson & Newson, 1975) and they experience intersubjectivity. When contextual and conceptual intersubjectivity is achieved, that is, the lecturer (the perceived more knowledgeable other) has an understanding of the concepts and contexts that work-based learners' have gained within the higher education institution and their workplace, shared meaning and mutual understanding can be foregrounded in the relevant institutional and work contexts, which ensures a common ground for communicating ideas (Fleer, 2010).

For this reason, social constructivism is currently viewed as one of the most effective methods of teaching and learning (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010; Blackmur, 2015). Co-constructing knowledge through social interactions seems to be a suitable approach to teach work-based students. Nonaka et al. (2000, p. 8) explain the process of knowledge creation as follows,

Knowledge creation is a continuous, self-transcending process through which one transcends the boundary of the old self into a new self by acquiring a new context, a new view of the world, and new knowledge. ...One also transcends the boundary between self and other, as knowledge is created through the interactions amongst individuals or between individuals and their environment.

Starting from the idea that there are two major types of knowledge, tacit and explicit, Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) developed the SECI model, in which the process of 'knowledge conversion' goes through 4 modes of knowledge creation as reported in Table 1 below and drawn from Nonaka et al. (2000, pp. 9–10).

Nonaka et al. (2000) here emphasise the collective nature of constructing knowledge and their model is designed through a social constructivist lens. However, in far



too many higher education institutions the dominant discourse, on which education is based, runs opposite to this social constructivist view. Traditional teaching is still conceived as a top-down process of knowledge transmission; this is what is seen as the order of things (Foucault, 1970).

**Table 1. The knowledge conversion process**

Knowledge conversion mode	Explanation
<b>Socialization</b>	<i>'...the process of converting new tacit knowledge through shared experiences' (9).</i>
<b>Externalization</b>	<i>'...the process of articulating tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.'</i> (9). This process 'crystallises' knowledge in such a way which can be shared with and by others and it becomes new knowledge.
<b>Combination</b>	<i>'...the process of converting explicit knowledge into more complex and systematic sets of explicit knowledge' (9)</i> by drawing from internal (i.e.: colleagues in the workplace) and external (i.e.: lecturers, peers at HEI) sources. The process of combination also formalizes knowledge thus creating systemic and specific ways of knowing and behaving.
<b>Internalization</b>	Closely related to 'learning by doing', internalization is <i>'the process of embodying explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge. Through internalisation, explicit knowledge created is shared throughout an organisation and converted into tacit knowledge by individuals.'</i> (10) This process then becomes a further stage of socialization.

## Methodology

This section outlines the methodological design of this small-scale exploratory case study (Yin, 2018). The study employed a mixed-method approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), where the questionnaire used for data collection enabled both findings to be quantified and students' qualitative comments to be captured. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) the use of numbers is not regarded as sufficient to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative research. In this current study the process of analysis was carried out largely qualitatively and the numbers were used to help the researchers present their findings and make claims more precisely (Becker, 1970 cited in Maxwell, 2010). Stratified purposive sampling was adopted to secure participants on a voluntary, self-selected basis from the first-year cohort of the Early Years Foundation Degree students at the study higher education institution (Robinson, 2014). Participation was not restricted in number and 17 participants volunteered. All 17 students were female, which is representative of the current early years workforce in England

where only approximately 2% of early childhood practitioners are male (Simon et al., 2015). The participants were all non-traditional entrants to Higher Education: they had been out of education for a while and many (11) of them were first generation higher education students.

Beliefs and attitudes questionnaires were administered at the end of the ‘Understanding Child Development’ first year module (Oppenheim, 1992). The questionnaire asked students to, first, rate, then to rank eleven strategies embedded into the module’s taught sessions and independent study tasks. These strategies listed in Table 2 below were designed to help students apply theories to practice.

**Table 2. List of strategies employed in the module teaching**

Strategies employed:	
1.	Lecturer’s input on child development theories.
2.	Extensive underpinning reading as part of your studies but out of sessions.
3.	Applying theories to work-based observations of children as they play.
4.	Applying child development theories to video observations of children as part of the taught sessions.
5.	Completing assignments that are practice based.
6.	Formative feedback from the lecturer on your attempts to apply theory to practice, for example via evaluating child observations.
7.	Formative feedback from your peers (for example: on your observations).
8.	‘Surgery’ type of sessions where an extensive range of academic texts are made available during the session and the lecturer supports you personally with applying theory to practice.
9.	Group (whole class or small groups) discussions during the taught sessions.
10.	Written feedback on your assignments addressed personally to you.
11.	Visiting each other’s settings and seeing theory applied in practice.

The questionnaire included Likert-scale ranking questions and opportunities for the participants to offer qualitative comments. The Likert-scale ‘builds in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response whilst still generating numbers’ with its key feature of ‘unidimensionality’, when the scale measures one thing at a time (Cohen et al., 2017, pp. 386, 387). Limitations are that it affords no assumption of equal intervals between the categories and that the numbers on the scale may have different meanings for different participants (Cohen et al., 2017). The purpose of the rank ordering

element of the questionnaire was to identify the top five most useful strategies. This enabled a degree of preference to be charted by participants.

To respond to the questionnaire's rating questions, students selected categories that spanned between '*helped greatly*' and '*helped very little*' with no regard to how they judged any other statement. The ranking exercise, however, highlighted student preferences. It allowed the participants to reflect on and evaluate the entire range of strategies that they had previously rated and indicate the relative value and importance of each in relation to the others. For the purpose of this small-scale project, a mathematical formula was applied to give proportionate weighting to the items appearing in the 'top five' list. The first in the 'top five' received 'five' scores, the second was allocated 'four', ...etc. and the teaching and learning strategy in fifth place was allocated 'one'. Similarly, in the rating part of the questionnaire, where students selected '*helped very little*', their score was counted as 'one', and where '*helped greatly*' was selected, the score of 'five' was applied. The entire scale ran between 'one' and 'five' with the respective scores applied in between. The same mathematical formula being applied to both the ratings and the rankings allowed comparisons to be made.

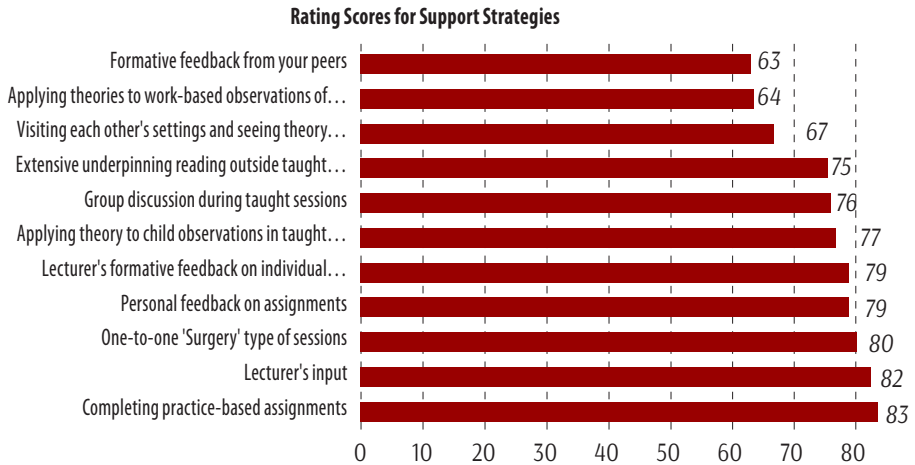
Views and opinions were also sought to qualify the rating and rankings decisions. Gray (2018, p. 354) asserts that this 'richness of response' is useful within questionnaires to add the depth and detail required. This was the case in this study, with the data being enriched by these opinions.

Prior to conducting the project, ethical approval was secured from the higher education institution, then participants' written, voluntary informed consent was sought with the right to withdraw emphasised. In respect of the study process, the ethical code and procedures of both the higher education institution and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) were adhered to with regards to anonymity, confidentiality, non-maleficence and data protection. As insider researchers (Milligan, 2016) the authors fulfilled the research role at the same time as the normal teaching role (Coghlan & Holian, 2007), in which the 'personal' (Van Dijk, 2001) presented a challenge to subjectivity. The enquiry to one's own teaching practice could be viewed as 'an expression of personal interest and values' (Usher, 2002, p. 36), therefore, both reflexivity and reflectivity played a key role in eliminating bias (Teausner, 2016) and contributing to self-triangulation (Drake, 2010).

## **Findings**

The rating exercise provided a landscape view of how students felt about the teaching strategies that were included in the questionnaire, while the ranking scores offered a more focused view of how helpful students found those strategies for enabling them

to contextualise and apply their theoretical learning in practice. Figure 2 reports the findings from the rating exercise.



**Figure 2. Rating scores for the eleven strategies employed**

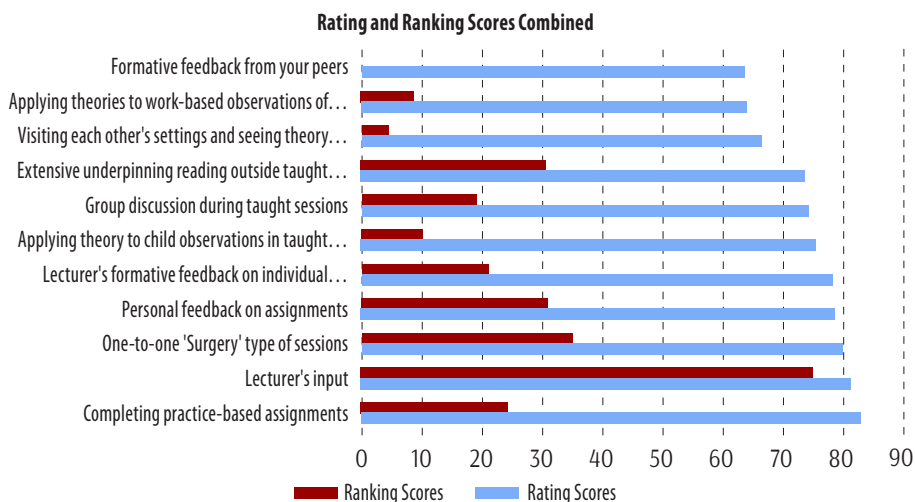
Figure 2 indicates that participants rated all eleven support strategies highly; the total scores show very small variation ranging between 63 and 83. There is evidence for both student and lecturer focused strategies being rated high.

However, the ranking exercise shows a different picture: Figure 3 evidences that 'lecturer input' and 'surgery-type of one-to-one sessions' were considered most effective.



**Figure 3. Summary of ranking scores for the eleven strategies employed**

Figure 4 findings suggest a different pattern between students' ratings (blue bars) and rankings (red bars); rankings allowed for more in-depth analysis.



**Figure 4. Summary of both 'rating' and 'ranking'**

'Applying theories to work-based observations', 'formative feedback from peers' and 'visiting each other's settings seeing theory applied in practice' were the three lowest rated and lowest ranked strategies. However, since they are still rated as (5), (4) and (3) by the majority of the students – (5) being the highest score and (1) the lowest on the Likert-scale – students indicated that they did not view these as strategies that had not supported their learning.

## Discussion

This section interprets the findings with a focus on the interplay between the students' various communities, features of andragogic and heutagogic learning, the process of knowledge creation and what hierarchies claiming knowledge might create. A brief summary of the findings highlights key issues that are addressed in the analysis, which also includes suggestions for changing, improving and revising ways to support work-based Early Years Foundation Degree students.

When examining the findings from the rating and ranking questions, two of the top three rated and ranked strategies ('lecturer's input' and 'one-to-one 'surgery'-type of sessions') align. However, the highest rated strategy – 'completing practice-based assignments' – only featured as fifth highest in the ranking list. This captures two

different and contrasting views, which could be explained in two ways: one is that students are valuing independent, self-directed learning where they may be seen as the more knowledgeable others; and the other is, that they regard a task that requires more independent study and less tutor input less favourably. This suggestion is echoed in the students' ranking of the top three 'most useful' strategies, all of which include involvement of the module tutor: 'lecturer's input on child development theories', 'one-to-one surgery type sessions' and 'personalised feedback on assignments'.

Findings from both the rating and ranking parts of the questionnaire suggest that input from the tutor was valued the most highly by students. These findings were further supported by a zero ranking and the lowest rating from the students for 'formative feedback from peers'. This finding suggests that students did not see each other as a source of knowledge or expertise in the higher education context. Out of the five qualitative comments provided by the students, four reiterated this point. Students viewed the lecturer as a person who is "always willing to explain" and who "welcomes questions no matter how vague". Only one qualitative comment acknowledged students providing support for each other out of taught sessions: "sometimes we help each other when we are stuck on something as we are doing uni work at home".

### **The 'more knowledgeable other': disrupting what we know**

The findings suggest that students saw their lecturers as the 'more knowledgeable others' (Vygotsky, 1978), who provided strategies to scaffold their learning. The distinction between who has the knowledge and who seeks it is a traditional dichotomy on which not just schooling but also higher education, and, to a great extent, professional training and development are based. Grounded in the assumption that knowledge is something we can quantify and measure, education, as we know it, has created hierarchies of 'knowledgeable others' and systems to assess and value the knowledge we gain from interacting with such figures.

The finding that students rated and ranked the support they received from lecturers more highly than the support they received from peers should therefore not surprise us. As Foucault (1970) argued, the students' preferences reify and reinforce the predominant discourse onto which education is based. Their value judgements, therefore, mirror how traditional teaching is still conceived as a top-down process of transmitting knowledge.

However, social constructivist philosophy underlined the approach taken to develop the Understanding Child Development module and is the approach that lies at the heart of a work-based programme of study (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010;

Blackmur, 2015). The present study's findings raise questions concerning the nature and purpose of teaching and learning for Early Years Foundation Degree students in a higher education environment. The students had traditional expectations of their lecturers as More Knowledgeable Others but did not recognise value in andragogic strategies that gave primacy to their own autonomous actions as learners (Knowles, 1984). This creates an obstacle to achieving both conceptual and contextual intersubjectivity between the students themselves and between the students and lecturer, which is the key ingredient for shared meaning and mutual understanding to be foregrounded in the relevant learning context (Fleer, 2010). It could be possible that both the rating and the ranking results reflect the Early Years Foundation Degree students' expectations of more scaffolding of their learning than co-constructing knowledge, the onus being on the lecturer, perceived as the more knowledgeable other, in this higher education learning context.

### **The transferability of knowledge: permeable borders or solid boundaries?**

One of the main challenges for the Early Years Foundation Degree is to bring together in a seamless way both course-based learning and work-based experience (Basit et al., 2015). An additional challenge is in ensuring that these two knowledge domains have permeable borders allowing for the application of theoretical knowledge to the daily work experiences of a diverse student cohort. Yet, the present study's findings suggest that participating Early Years Foundation Degree students saw each aspect as discrete, which undermines the transferability of their knowledge, not only vertically between theory to practice, but also horizontally between the students as both learners and each other's teachers.

The findings suggest that the students did not recognise the potential value in the collective nature of learning in practice and in taught sessions. Equally, they suggest that the Early Years Foundation Degree students did not see that the approach that they took in their communities of practice in the workplace could be transferred to classroom learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The transferability of knowledge across domains and professional spaces has repercussions for how a university degree can support employability in the early childhood workplace. The participating Early Years Foundation Degree students were practitioners in their early years settings who already belonged to communities of practice and were already engaged in situated learning (Pytko et al., 2019). Their learning took place in a 'participatory framework, not in an individual mind: it was already mediated by differences of perspectives amongst

co-participants' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15). Yet they expected – and wanted – their lecturers to act as 'More Knowledgeable Others' who transmitted knowledge to them.

What is troubling in this argument and evidenced in the findings is the dissonance between how our Foundation Degree students learn in their practice and how they learn in the Higher Education context. As they are taught child development theories in sessions, they try and make sense of them by drawing on the very valuable but greatly varying practical experiences that they come with. This results in their understanding only partially matching that of the lecturer's as well as the fellow students', leaving the participants of the learning process with alternative conceptions of the same idea or theory. This mismatch can be improved by extended dialogue and can also be fostered by developing both andragogic (Knowles, 1984) and heutagogic (Hase & Kenyon, 2000) strategies better suited to make direct links between students' practical experiences and theoretical knowledge.

Extended dialogue, critical debate and cycles of reflection between students and lecturers as well as among students themselves could be nurtured in communities of inquiry, which facilitate higher level collaborative learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Akyol & Garrison, 2011). This deep level and meaningful learning has transformative potential in terms of quality of practice or indeed employability – as long as in the landscapes of practice (Wenger, 1998), the borders of communities of learning and communities of inquiry at work and in higher education are permeable instead of them staying in fool-proof and separate containers (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2014).

Learner development comes from transformation through participation as opposed to development being located within the individual (Pyrko et al., 2019). Communities of learners (both in practice and in the context of inquiry) are aligned to this idea. Through growth in confidence, autonomy and capability, the learner moves from self-directed to self-determined learning (Chacko, 2018). In the case of The Early Years Foundation Degree work-based students, the borders between andragogic and heutagogic approaches across the higher education institution and their workplaces can be seen as permeable instead of fool-proof in a hierarchical way (Canning & Callan, 2010). While in a higher education context the Early Years Foundation Degree students indicated their need for guidance from their lecturers, in their workplace they may appear as more self-determined learners, whose decisions on what, when and how to change or develop in practice are based on their theoretical knowledge and understanding gained in their higher education institutions. From the lecturer's point view, this invites further reflection on the notion of 'theory to practice' versus 'practice to theory' and will be discussed in the next section of this paper.



## **From practice to theory: exploring new ways of creating knowledge**

We started this paper by drawing attention to the important role that reflection plays in supporting the practice of teaching. We have used reflection to understand the findings and, in particular, the dissonance between learning at university and learning on the job. We have used this to think about ways in which students can be helped to make knowledge across the two domains more transferable. This section is a rejoinder of sorts in as much as it tries to close the circle of reflection. It shifts the focus back onto us as lecturers but compels us to make the opposite journey we ask our students to do. Instead of applying theory to practice, our objective in this final section is to use practice for the development of a theoretical understanding of the lessons we have just learned. Not unlike the students, we start from the knowledge we bring to our practice and the different theoretical lenses which we embody our teaching with. In either case, the focus of our reflection is on how, through our teaching, we can construct and support the creation, transmission and application of knowledge.

The first theoretical reflection we would like to make regards the usefulness of the social-constructivist approach. When thinking about knowledge as something being constructed rather than transmitted, we draw on Vygotsky's (1978) theory that claims that learning takes place in a social context through interactions with others. Applying this approach to work-based learning invokes ideas that knowledge finds its anchor in situated-learning and the corresponding pedagogical approaches manifest themselves in problem-based or experiential learning and reflective practice (Pritchard, and Woollard, 2010; Blackmur, 2015). Trying to understand the relationship between students and knowledge in a higher education context echoes two key points: that learning is a personal experience and that it can be enhanced by collectively constructing knowledge. The fact that both individual and collective approaches to learning were represented in the teaching strategies listed in the student questionnaire suggests that the lecturer is in full recognition of this notion.

The second point focuses on the process of knowledge conversion, by which implicitly held personal knowledge becomes first explicit and then implicit professional knowledge. In explaining the process of knowledge creation within the higher education institution, Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995, cited in Nonaka et al. (2000) work is useful. Their SECI model explains how students could potentially convert knowledge between the processes of work-based learning (socialisation and internationalisation) and learning in higher education (externalisation and combination). Equally, the model sums up our knowledge conversion process facilitated by the critical reflection that this small-scale enquiry-based study has prompted.

## **Lessons Learnt and Limitations of the Study**

Although small-scale in both size and scope, the exercise was useful in bringing to the fore a number of issues that would have been overlooked otherwise. The findings as a whole, and both the rating and ranking scores, highlighted both similarities and discrepancies in how the students viewed the supportive nature and usefulness of a number of andragogic strategies designed to enable them to apply theories of child development to their daily practice in the early years settings where they worked.

Although limited in terms of its methodology and scale, this small-scale research provided ample food for thought in our quest to enhance our students' learning. As the findings disrupted our implicit assumptions about what students find useful, they made us question our theoretical principles and our andragogic approaches and they made us reconsider three basic assumption of work-based learning. The first is that the application of theory to practice is a simple process. The second assumption is that students learn better when working with peers and in groups. The third assumption is that andragogic and heutagogic approaches are separate and hierarchical in nature. Finding a resolution to these dilemmas brought us to reflect on the many ways in which we learn and on the process by which knowledge is converted within different, overlapping and, sometimes, clashing contexts.

With regard to the first dilemma, Barnett and Coate's (2010) concept of 'knowing' is worth examining. It requires personal engagement with knowledge, which incorporates the learner constantly interpreting his/her own actions. Managing our changing worlds of 'knowing' requires certain kinds of human capacities and dispositions. Among them are sensitivity and flexibility as desired attributes for teachers to make the interactive process of teaching successful. Through these both conceptual and contextual intersubjectivity can be achieved (Fleer, 2010). These concepts have been pertinent when reflecting on supporting work-based learners because they are conducive to an approach that responds to students' needs in real-time.

With regard to the second, Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model made us reflect on the need to go beyond a singular notion of communities of practice. Rather, as Wenger-Trayner et al. (2014) argue, we need to think about multiple and networked communities of practice. In the case of our students, they are asked to work effectively in at least three overlapping communities: their workplace, the workplace of their peers, and that of their course. While being learners in all of them, they are positioned and position themselves as experts, in their own and in relation to their peers' workplace, but as lacking knowledge in relation to their course communities. While conceiving our students as knowledgeable others in relation to their professional practice is within an accepted view of what mature students bring to their learning, the finding that peer support was not appreciated as a successful strategy forces us to reflect on

how best to develop a classroom and learning context where collectively they can shape and change their mental models.

As for the third dilemma on permeable borders, we have become consciously aware that, while in a higher education institution context, work-based learners may require direction (andragogic approaches), in their workplace they are capable and competent with the capacity for self-determined learning (heutagogy) through reflection and creative application of theoretical knowledge acquired at their higher education institution. This is through internalisation, which, according to Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995 in Nonaka et al., 2000) model, is the process of turning explicit knowledge (gained at the HEI) into tacit knowledge, or 'knowing' within the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

Constructing a collective community of learning obliges us to reflect on our role as knowledgeable others and strike a balance between what our students expect from us and what we want them to achieve and become. A possible solution is to focus on the nature of the process by which we build and withdraw support. We need to consider employing strategies that promote more autonomy and lead students to self-determining their learning paths in learning contexts other than their workplace. Heutagogy offers empowerment and resilience for Early Years Foundation Degree students working in an educational environment that is complex, unpredictable and ever-changing. Another, to be used in parallel, is to start with building a stronger context for 'socialisation' (as per Table 2), in which students have time and opportunity to learn from each other and come to appreciate their peers as knowledgeable others.

Enhancing the student experience requires us as teachers to be willing to go beyond our own assumptions about how students learn and about what we think is the most successful strategy. Higher education lecturers working with work-based Early Years Foundation Degree students should adopt andragogic and heutagogic strategies, including peer support and co-construction of learning, and they should communicate explicitly to their students the value of such strategies for learning in the field, both in theory and practice. Paradoxically, the small-scale research demanded of us what we ask of our students: to put theory to practice and practice to theory. It forced us to go beyond our comfort zone, to learn from each other, to dialogue and find solutions to the problems we encountered. Although aware of the limitations of our research, what we have learned has the potential to help colleagues to reflect on the way in which they build communities of practice and inquiry as a community of learning.

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