A path of crazy paving: Paraprofessional engagement in foundation degree study

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Abstract

Foundation degrees have been developed in the UK as a means of meeting the learning needs of paraprofessionals in health and social care and the services within which they work. Workplace learning is an intrinsic component to these degrees. Thus, changing practice through study is not simply a matter of pedagogy but is shaped by workplace conditions. A small scale evaluation study focused on the learning experiences of a group of paraprofessionals enrolled in a Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care was carried out. The study aimed to understand their perceptions of the socio-cultural factors shaping their engagement with study and their learning in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews explored their work and study backgrounds and current experiences combining work and study. Thematic analysis revealed a dynamic relationship between personal employment trajectories, the nature of the workplace and the learning experience. This dynamic plays a significant role in determining the educational and career outcomes of the Foundation Degree. Foundation degree study offered students the possibility of moving on in their careers but some experienced difficulties with progression. Workplaces are environments potentially rich in informal learning support but can both support and undermine study. For example time limitations could lead to superficial and ambivalent engagement in learning. Recommendations for the design of Foundation degrees include mechanisms for strengthening university involvement to ensure appropriate workplace support.

Key words: Paraprofessionals, Work-Based Learning, health and social care, Workplace as a Learning Environment, foundation degree, Career Development

Introduction

Over the last three decades the 'quiet revolution' in the profile of assistants in heath care described by Thornley (2000) can be seen as extending to other groups such as care workers or assistants to the allied health professions. This group, collectively referred to here as paraprofessionals, has a long history of supporting professionals in health and social care (See for example, Stokes and Warden, 2004). Their presence has often gone unacknowledged and their significance in providing continuity of care, unrecognized. However, as the increased use of paraprofessionals is now seen as a cost effective method to address the problem of under resourced, over-subscribed health and social care services, there are multiple implications for this group of workers. As support workers shoulder more of the front line work there is an increasing requirement for their systematic development in both health (Atwal, Tattersall et al. 2006) and social care (Moss et. al, 2006).

Cameron and Boddy (2006) have argued that low levels of skills are no longer sufficient Thus, there is a drive for paraprofessionals to acquire qualifications in order to work in the sector. The complexity and demanding nature of care work is increasingly recognised as government policy demands higher standards of care. Service users themselves are no longer seen as passive recipients of care but active citizens calling in their rights for quality. Holistic care is being given increasing priority. This means that the discrete tasks of caring (e.g. washing or feeding) are not merely instrumental tasks to be delegated to the unqualified. They are part of developing and deepening the relationship with the client and creating opportunities for supporting that person's development and autonomy (Moss et al., 2006)

Health and social care is an ever evolving landscape of high public expectations, professional standards, social welfare legislation, pressure to avoid delayed hospital discharge, a litigious culture dampened with risk management procedures (Fleming and Taylor 2007). It is unsurprising then that in some quarters, paraprofessional roles are being reframed as professional ones (Rainbird, Munro et al. 1999; Moss, Cameron

et al. 2006) - autonomous, independent and accountable for their actions (Mackey 2004). Similarly, increased concerns for public protection have lead to plans for registration across HSC (Department of Health 2006; General Social Care Council 2007).

Thus, support worker development is becoming a priority. The foundation degree has been created as one approach to their development (see Conner and McKnight 2003; Priestley, Selfe et al. 2003; Chaney, Callaghan et al. 2005). In a context where much development for this group has centred on vocational training, the foundation degree presents a departure in that it involves academic education, a process which may be understood as part of the professionalisation of this group. The foundation degree is two year sub-degree linked to intermediate level of occupations or mid-skilled level market (Wilson and Blewitt 2005). Although a degree in its own right, foundation degrees should have the potential to lead into an honours degree (QAA 2004) and in some programmes, a pre-registration training programme. The degree typically remains close to and services the skill needs of the employer by blending the academic study with work-based learning activities (QAA 2004). Thus, the student not only studies for their degree in the educational institution but also builds and applies their understanding through formal or informal learning activity in the workplace.

The students' experience in the foundation degree, as a work-based programme of study, will be influenced by the nature of the workplace and the support available there. Focusing on the experiences of a group of paraprofessionals in a foundation degree in health and social care, this paper reports on the factors affecting their engagement in learning. Adopting a socio-cultural perspective on learning, the way in which workplace characteristics and career opportunities impact on learning are discussed, as are implications for foundation degree design.

Learning through and for practice

The development of practice is not simply an outcome of course design, teaching or tutorial strategy. Practice development is also a product of participation in a particular setting. Socio-cultural perspectives on learning emphasize the role of the physical and social context in development (Sfard 1998; Barab, Barnett et al. 2002). Knowledge and practice are socially embedded, a property of both social groups and individuals. Learning involves participating in a community of practice, becoming a member by using its language and acting according to its particular norms (Sfard 1998). Therefore, in work-based programmes such as a foundation degree, the nature of the workplace and one's role within it will influence what and how individuals come to learn.

Changing practice through study is not simply a process of transferring distilled abstract knowledge from the academy to the workplace. It also involves reconstructing what has been learnt through participation in each setting (Toal-Sullivan 2006). For example, Henderson (2002) emphasises the important contributions made by role models and collegial reference groups to effective practice development. Chaney et al., (2005) point out that when learners have a workplace-based mentor who can mediate what has been learned off-site (i.e. help the learner assimilate the knowledge and insight they have gained and transfer it to the practice setting) this can have major dividends in the learner's ability to put their new knowledge into practice. Tennant (1999) also acknowledges the part played by supervisor and collegial support, but adds another dimension, by drawing attention to the way that other positive outcomes (such as opportunities for career advancement) can influence 'successful' transfer from academic to workplace settings. Thus, even though university education will have considerable impact of individuals' understanding, the shape of their practice is very much dependent on the conditions in the workplace. It is worth exploring the way in which health and social care workplace conditions impact on the learning of this group.

Barriers to learning in the workplace

The very resource deficits in personnel, finance, and time to which paraprofessionals are seen as a partial remedy can also militate against their learning opportunities. Time pressures resulting from inadequate staffing, increased demands for services and the needs of other staff in training can restrict development (Hancock 2005). It is difficult to free staff from duties to engage in professional development activities (McBride, Mustchin et al. 2004; Sutton, Valentine et al. 2004). "Time-poor" workers will have limited opportunities for reflection or discussion with colleagues. Paraprofessionals report that changes to practice following education can be inhibited by heavy workload (Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou, 2006)

Engagement with colleagues that supports learning may also be problematic. Mentors are a required component of some Foundation Degrees and a key means of employer engagement in worker development. In health and social care settings, mentors not only guide learning, facilitate the transfer of theory to practice but also provide supervision. Supervision can involve not only assessment of performance but also the oversight of practice and emotional support for work that can require intense interpersonal interactions. In their research into Foundation Degree provision, Chaney et al., (2005) reported a near universal shortage of mentors. This pattern is seen elsewhere. Coffrey (2004) reports that heavy workload and lack of time left 62% of nurse respondents uninterested in assisting support worker learning. Lack of training for supervisors may also be an issue in poor supervision (Coffrey 2004; Ellis and Connell 2001). Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou (2006) found that paraprofessionals studying an external course reported that the lack of management back-up inhibited changes to practice. The students in their study became increasingly demoralised by their awareness of bad practice leaving some feeling compelled to resign rather than continue to work in a service perceived as lacking.

Workplace hierarchies, group affiliations and cultural practices also serve to distribute opportunities to act and interact in workplaces (Billett 2002) an assertion resonating in health and social care (see McBride et al., 2004). The lack of

standardized, consistent training available for assistants can both impact upon or reflect the perceived value given to their role (Keeney, Hasson et al. 2005). In addition, being trained can change the power dynamics in a workplace (Rainbird, Munro et al. 1999). For example, Mackey (2004) suggests that a highly skilled and trained occupational therapy support worker blurs the boundaries between professional and non professional staff, possibly invalidating the necessity for the former's formal education. Thus the divide between professional and non-professional status can limit the progression of the support worker who is seen as impinging on the status of the professional (McBride, Mustchin et al. 2004).

Training and education validate staff skills (McBride 2005) or makes experience count for something (Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou 2006). NVQs have been resisted by employers as they highlight the previously unacknowledged aspects of assistants' work that overlap with that of the professional staff (Thornley 2000). A qualification represents a form of power and workers may draw upon the symbolic power of being qualified. Possessing qualifications can alter collegial perceptions of worker status (Munro, Holly et al. 2000) or the worker's attitude to their work. For example, after completing NVQs, assistants became reluctant to re-assume basic duties, arguing that these should be taken on by non-qualified staff (Keeney, Hasson et al. 2005).

The wider context

Development does not simply occur within the context of the workplace but also within the context of a life and a career trajectory. Chaney et al., (2005) argue that opportunities provided by the foundation degrees for career enhancement and achievement of potential are crucial determinants of participation in study. However, participants hoping for progression in responsibility and awards, can be disappointed at the 'looseness' of fit between the programme and progression opportunities at work and onto professional awards. Progression is a complex process in which there is no clear or simple vocational ladder to higher levels, and students, lacking awareness of

work-based routes to higher education or employer support for further learning, may encounter difficulties (Connon and Little 2005)

The National Health Service has developed a learning framework, called the Skills Escalator, a model of lifelong learning. Paradoxically, it is undermined by the inability of some organisations to commit to meeting learning needs requiring the acquisition of higher level skills over periods longer than one year (McBride et al., 2005). Moreover, paraprofessionals may be reluctant to engage in training because of the lack of financial reward at the end of it (Ellis and Connell 2001; Hancock 2005; Rolfe 1997). Development of paraprofessionals requires an organisational commitment that may be beyond the control of frontline workers. The lack of such commitment and opportunities for progression undermine motivation.

The current study

So, while the development of support staff may be perceived as a necessity there may be considerable ambivalence in health and social care organizations that can constrain their development. Developing a foundation degree, the authors of this paper were particularly alert to the need to understand the dynamics of workplace support for learning. After all, the success of the students' study experience, especially in the work-based elements, depends upon the conditions in the workplace. The small-scale evaluation study described here provides workers' perspectives and experiences of participating in a particular foundation degree programme in health and social care. A key aim was to understand the socio-cultural factors that shape learning in the workplace and engagement in study.

Methodology

Before describing research method, the participants in this study need to be placed within their educational context. The students participating in this study were enrolled in a four year part time foundation degree taught at a distance. This degree responded to a policy call for the development of a 'generic' support worker with enough knowledge and skill flexibility to work across the boundaries of health and

social care. This meant that the degree curriculum did not simply draw from the knowledge-base of single profession and was not designed to articulate into a discipline-specific pre-registration training programme. Reflecting upon and developing practice was a particular focus of the students' study.

The students' course fees were paid by their employer or union and there was an expectation that they would be relieved of duties for study leave half a day a week. The students in this study were drawn from two 9 month foundation degree courses – a practice-oriented theory course and a work-based course.

The work-based course complemented the theoretical course but required closer involvement with a workplace. The student was required to perform a number of work-based tasks such as: observing colleagues at practice; interviewing professionals and service users; conducting environmental audits; and analysing policy documents. It also involves the development and assessment of particular generic skills and knowledge in practice using a framework developed from the Health Professions Council's standards of proficiency. It was envisaged that as both courses involved building a deeper understanding of, and changing student practice, the learning experience in both courses would be shaped by the workplace. In the theory course, students were encouraged to build an understanding of the broader contexts that shape the provision of health and social care services in the United Kingdom.

Participants

Twenty workers, the first year intake on the degree, were involved in the study:

- 12 Mental health workers
- Three occupational therapy assistants or technical instructors
- Two physiotherapy assistants
- One senior care officer and two care managers, working with service users to put together care plans or managing teams

Ethics approval

The project was approved by the University's Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee.

Method

A semi-structured schedule balancing open ended exploration with focused enquiry was used to interview participants about their educational and employment life histories, the nature of their work role, workplace and home life. Learning and development through practice and the associated experience of foundation degree study were a particular focus in the interviews. The intention was to interview each student twice –once early on in the course and then again towards the end in order to track changes over time. However, for various reasons (ill health and long term leave were two reasons given), five students declined to participate in a second interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis and interpretation

The interviews for each participant were consolidated into case studies. Using thematic analysis, (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and guided by a constructionist epistemology, three researchers read across the case studies generating and collating initial codes. The codes were revisited and the researchers sorted the codes into preliminary themes. They considered the relationship between codes, themes and different levels of themes. The preliminary themes the researchers identified across case studies were compared and developed further into overarching themes common to the participants. Using this method, the analysts worked to achieve deeper insight into the participants' experiences - searching for commonalities and uniqueness across the participants and exploring the meaning of the themes identified from the data (Boyle 1994). A constructionist perspective suggests that meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced. (Burr, 1995). Thus the focus of the analysis was not on individual motivations and psychologies but on the socio-cultural conditions within which the individual accounts were based.

Results

Interactions between personal trajectories, the workplace and learning
The interviews explored each participant's history since leaving school. The interview data indicated fragmented employment patterns – people taking whatever work they could to get by, some moving from job to job with no clear pathway or direction and others trying different roles on for size. The following quotation gives a sense of the fragmentation.
"At college I did a welfare course then … I worked for a company making toys… I became a paint sprayer… … I had my first son …I started work with young people…I've been a counsellor…"

A number of external factors determined these choppy career patterns – family and partner responsibilities, economic downturns and redundancy, 'anything to pay the mortgage' or bowing to pressure to follow the family career and preferences. Several participants expressed disappointment at the thwarting of early ambitions for professional careers.

Yet for many, set against this fragmented career path was a sense of vocation – of discovering (sometimes accidentally) a talent and passion for the work and genuine concern for their service users. They saw themselves as 'people people.' They enjoyed its unpredictable, immediate and visceral nature. They had an affinity for the people they served. Many seemed to be engaged in similar work with their families as parent or partners, in voluntary organisations or through a portfolio of people work.

In terms of their career trajectory, participants framed foundation degree study in different ways. Some were studying for personal development only and had little desire to progress into senior roles. Their study was simply a way to understand their work and their clients better. This was a process of deepening their vocation and

understanding. For others, study offered the promise of reducing vulnerability, securing a stronger foothold in the workplace and accessing different opportunities:
"I just think of some of the jobs I have had before and that studying is a means to the end of not doing these jobs any more. And also too, you know, to be able to give my children a hand up. And also to make you a little bit more indispensable. If you are quite well qualified in your position you know, it's less likely you're going to get tossed out with the rubbish."

Others recognised that without qualifications they had few prospects for progression in their role:
"…obviously there's no prospects of getting any higher … the frustration comes when obviously there's no promotion … I'm doing probably higher level than a qualified junior…you'd need qualifications in order to move up'

Several participants expressed a desire to progress into professional training and ultimately a professional role. For some participants, the foundation degree expanded their thinking about what their career could be. At the same time though, plans could lack concreteness. A number referred to a desire to become trained social workers, psychiatric nurses or educational psychologists even though the programme was not designed to articulate into these courses. Participants seemed unaware of what programme of study would take them into those roles or even the demands of the foundation degree itself:
"Well, they say it's 4 years don't they or something.. Some people say its four years, some people saying its six years I dunno',

Moreover, some students presented contradictory opinions both wanting to progress to professional roles while admitting they had no long term ambition to serve in one of these roles. Plans seemed provisional or embryonic. There was a sense of trying things out through study.

In considering plans for the future, the ambiguity about goals was exacerbated by a sense of precariousness or unpredictability. Certainly, in some follow up interviews, the initial excitement of studying had been replaced by a feeling of disenchantment - some students had changed their mind in the face of the intensity of the demands of study or the changes in the work environment. For many students the length of time to progress into a professional role was a major factor in feeling unsure about whether the FD was the right route for progression.

Some reflected on possible development pathways to different roles but intimated that the funding and provision of services were very unpredictable creating a lack of certainty about their future:

"It's ongoing at the moment, we're currently in the middle of a restructure, so it won't be on going forever, and it's likely that this role will end sooner rather than later…"

Some doubted the value of personal development because they weren't sure if their service would continue to be offered or if it was, there was no guarantee that they would receive any reward for further study. For example, one student worker expressed the disenchantment she experienced in trying to anticipate the latest performance schemes and match them with the educational experience on offer at that time:

"When I actually started on the whole of the foundation degree - this is the other thing - that because the Agenda for Change band wasn't fully out, and it was something that I thought, because before that I'd only got an NVQ level 3, and I was a tech before Agenda for Change, and I was sort of thinking, it's something I'll probably need for the KSF (Knowledge and Skills Framework) bit of Agenda for Change, to sort of up my knowledge. But in actual fact, it doesn't even feature in either band 4 or band 5 as far as knowledge goes. So once my band 5 banding had come through, I'm like why am I actually bothering to do this? I don't need to do it."

Workplace conditions

The interviews suggest that responses to learning are often closely related to conditions in their workplace. Participants referred to the way in which team relationships were important to the performance of their work. They described themselves as embedded in a network of colleagues in which they would discuss their service user's progress and contribute to decision making. Colleague to colleague talk was not only about practice but can be considered a key practice in itself as it led to the co-configuration of practice. Poor team communication or ill-informed decisions could have dire consequences:

"The support here could not be better, again, because we're dealing with people's lives we cannot be let out of our depth because we could make a major mistake …"

It follows then, that students' reports of workplace support for study were often related to their discussions of the broader team environment. In pursuit of academic understanding, students used their colleagues or supervisors as a resource for debate or to ask questions about baffling issues. Some supervisors would go as far as to provide feedback on written assignments. At the same time, because students were registered as cohorts of students from the same workplace and attended tutorials together, they could access solidarity in study and moral support:

"I think we all supported each other, the people on the same course – my work colleagues. But it wasn't a formal approach. We didn't have specific days to do anything, but we all knew the pressures that each and every one of us was under. Knowing that we were all in that, then that sort of makes it easier, it's not like you're one person on your own."

However, while tight teams provide support, they could undermine the student experience. When the team was negative about study, some students absorbed this unhappiness and reported it shaped their opinion. Other workers could undermine effective study habits by suggesting short cuts, superficial approaches to learning or advice for exams that proved erroneous. :

"I spoke to other people doing it and they were sort of saying "well I didn't do any of that. I didn't have time and I literally just read the bits I needed to do for the assignments".

This could undermine motivation:
"My colleague never did any of the activities, just the TMAs [assignments]. *It's hard to study when you know your colleague isn't doing the stuff you work hard at."*

Most students received regular work supervision. Surprisingly, given that the workplaces were funding study or providing time off work for it, a strong supervisory relationship to deal with work issues did not necessarily mean support for study. Although some students described supportive supervisors others noted that some could be somewhat detached from study issues. For example, some never discussed the student's study and its relationship with practice. Others required to supervise students in the work-based course would hold separate meetings for discussions of work and for study, separating the two activities as distinct realms. Some participants had not been encouraged to expand their horizons. For example, one student described her supervisor's disappointment with her ambitions to be a social worker which exerted a subtle pressure to stay in her current role rather than consider further training.

Time
Services are the targets of ever more rigorous cost cutting measures making participants' work lives busier and more intense:
"… we don't always have a case holder because of a lack of staff, so you are or I am, sometimes holding the case when I shouldn't be. I'm not qualified to do that and I am not paid to do that."

Students are studying in time and resource poor environments facing work intensification and a shortage of necessary staff. It is unsurprising that in this climate,

study could fall low on the list of priorities and pushing for paid study leave was difficult. When it came to claiming the study leave negotiated between the workplace and the university, some got it, some didn't. Some were not aware that they could have study leave at all. Some tried to take it but rarely got uninterrupted moments at work and couldn't get down to work.

Participants reported never having enough time, always running behind on their studies and experiencing particular strain. Studying on top of a full time job and family responsibilities shaped responses to study in three ways:

a. Strategic study: Some students adopted more strategic approaches to study – reading or completing practice activities selectively. Their selectivity hints at a problem with high workload – they didn't always have time to engage with the material or work through the challenges. Some found more economical or strategic approaches to their study resembling what would be described as surface approaches to learning:

"There is so much reading in this course, I think I was doing it wrong, I was reading the whole thing and then starting the assignment but what I've done online is I've started the assignment, I've done the intro and as I'm reading I'm adding to the assignment as I'm reading and doing notes."

b. Managing home life: Students reported busy personal lives. The course ate into personal time, requiring students to find ways to balance the demands of a family and social life. Home life could be a place of support or friction as family felt they wanted more of the participant. Some students had to find spaces away from the home to get uninterrupted space to study – working in the park or in the office after hours. One clearly ring fenced time to protect encroachment on other activities while another went with the flow:

"… it was pretty random for me. Whatever worked best at the time. And it depends what month it was – if there was an assignment due, urgency creeps in towards the end."

c. Taking work home: Students found that study never fitted with the 9-5 confines of the working day and would have to be done in personal time:

"Well, you've got no life when you're studying. I have whole Saturdays that disappear, and Sunday morning, getting up at 5:00 on a Sunday morning, and saying don't disturb me until 11 o'clock, so it does, the whole, from February to October, I am not the same person."

This created its own difficulties as personal life was no longer a refreshing break from the work day but a space where the same issues were rehashed, mulled over and written up through work-related study. It made work life which was demanding enough in its own right even more intense:

"It's almost like you would be continuing work, if you started studying in the evenings after work. There was no real switch-off. I felt on a few occasions I could do with being away from work. Because it [study] *sort of brought you back to work because obviously of the close relationship."*

The closeness to work would mean that some procrastinated, putting off their return to work through study, others felt bored or demotivated simply through being saturated by the presence of work in their life. Some would try to place buffer zones between study and work by focusing efforts on weekends rather than evenings. For some students, the intensity of study set against the demands it made on their home life left them reluctant to pursue further study.

Discussion

While there is policy rhetoric requiring support worker development and lifelong learning, opportunities to develop further and progress in one's career are not necessarily available in practice. In this discussion, we argue that these contradictions create an ambivalent learning experience – a path of crazy paving - that play out in terms of the recognition of study, career progression and work life, home life and study ambivalences. These ambivalences can be framed in terms

similar to the tensions described by Barab et al., (2002) who refer to dualities consisting of overlapping yet conflicting activities and needs. We see tensions as important focal points that need attention in learning design.

While workers were developing and deepening their understanding of practice through their study, there was little sense that they were being rewarded financially or in terms of occupational status. While these learners went into study with goals of deepening their knowledge and understanding, they would also be operating with a strong sense that the investment of their time should be rewarded simply because, as Elliott and Brna (2009) argue, qualifications tend to be linked to income. The lack of recognition of foundation degree study has the potential to drain student motivation.

This issue has been noted by others. For example, healthcare assistants can feel that their qualifications are not given the recognition that they deserve (Storey 2007). This may partly be an issue of the pervasive professional/academic-non professional/vocational divide that permeates attitudes to education and expertise. For example, writing about teaching assistants on a foundation degree, Goddard et al (2008) suggests that despite the Government's aims to erode the division between traditional and vocational education, a dichotomy and tension appears to remain between these two traditions. Their analysis of the hierarchical social and cultural practices of schooling has a close relationship to the status and position of health and social care workers in this study. They argue that the foundation degree is not seen as a 'real degree' in the same way that the teaching assistant is not seen as a real educator.

Non-recognition is also likely to be something more systemic. While the Foundation Degree was designed to take its place on the Skills Escalator and thus tie into worker progression, it requires recognition of skills by the employer. To some extent, this may be a matter of human resource policies that reward workers on the basis of activities performed rather than skills or experience. While an academic programme

may enhance the sophistication of practice, it may not bring about actual changes in role and therefore will not be rewarded.

Career development is a related issue. Upon entering the foundation degree, students had aspirations to progress into other roles. This sets up an ambivalence in which vocational education, designed to service the needs of the current employer, is effectively helping students move onto to other posts. In addition, by the end of their studies, many of these aspirations appear to have been abandoned. Certainly, students seemed to lack information about degree structures, articulation into professional programmes or the training requirements for particular roles. This situation suggests that students need support to meet the complexities of career and personal development planning. However, issues of career progression are not simply matters of better advice and guidance but related to context and personal orientation.

The interviews conveyed a sense that such future planning was difficult in the changeable Health and Social Care environment. Students experienced career goals and ambitions as precarious making any long term planning or strategy difficult to realise. So, workers' history of frustrated ambition and fragmented employment histories in the face of structural constraint appears to have been reproduced in their current workplace. It has been noted elsewhere that widening participation approaches may increase aspirations but not change the role of educational institutions in perpetuating and creating inequalities (Barber et al 2005). In the same way, the aspirations of some workers in this study do not appear supported by workplace conditions.

Student ambivalence about the demands of study and its benefits could be viewed within the context of their whole lives. Some held ambitions to progress into advanced roles but were ambivalent about the workload demands and sacrifices involved. Is this a matter of individual orientation among a group of students whose strong sense of vocation for the immediate and visceral nature of 'people work' may

not be well matched to unsocial hard slog of 4 years of study? Is a lifetime habit of fragmented career moves compatible with the long term commitment required to move into the roles described? Such conclusions should be treated with caution as they fail to address the structural inequality and the difficult conditions of students' lives.

The students' ambivalence about the workload demands also highlight the issue of limited time. In this study, the foundation degree allowed workers to combine work and study. On one hand, this is a boon for a group with multiple responsibilities and financial circumstances that do not afford them the absence from work required of a traditional programme of learning. However, as participants suggest, time is in short supply. On one level this is a matter of simply lacking time to study in depth or the resentment that some students get away with cutting corners. We also pick up Arthur and Tait's (2004) argument about the erosion of the clear time markers between work and non-work, formal learning and leisure. We suggest that study can further erode such time markers as learning for work has to be carried out in personal time. In the current project, this creates ambivalence in which study relevant to one's work role or job progression was welcomed but evoked the students' work life during personal time in an intrusive fashion.

In addition, the work life evoked by study took students away from their families and other things they valued. These students share the experience of the mature students described by Elliot and Brna (2009) who argue that family lives and concerns are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop, they are integral to their experience of higher education study. Decisions about what, where and when to study, and geographical, financial and time-related constraints can become primary considerations for those who have other major commitments.

Space and support – ensuring favourable learning conditions
Mindful of such demands, the university had required employers to provide students with paid study leave. The interviews suggest that many students had this

opportunity offered to them though the patterns of actual use are far from clear. Policy statements and top level agreements with management are one thing but as Bingham and O'Hara (2007) argue, existing practices, cultures and pedagogies are resistant to change. Having a policy about study leave is different from being actually able to take the time away from work. Students may not have been explicitly denied opportunities but found in daily flow of life time was eaten away. As Wilkes and Boniface (2004) suggest, the demands of work can crowd out professional development opportunities even though management asserts the importance on ongoing learning. Even when time is available, practitioners can feel guilty about prioritising learning activities over client contact, especially when colleagues are under pressure.

We argue then that for the students in this study, meeting the demands of academic work is not a neutral matter of managing time through techniques such as goal setting or timetabling. We see this as an emotionally laden process of juggling and torn priorities, a process of what Arthur and Tait (2004) refer to as time choreography.

The demands placed on students suggest that the support of supervisors and peers are crucial. There is a body of research suggesting that peers and supervisors have an important influence on the students' learning experience and their ability to reshape their practice in the light of academic knowledge (Henderson 2001; Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou 2006). For this reason, the university ensured that regular tutorials with students from the same workplace took place and that students had workplace supervisors or at least opportunities to discuss their academic practice with their supervisors. However, a word of caution is needed here. This strategy rests on an assumption that if one gets workplace structures such as supervision, support and study leave right, the outcomes will follow. However, the tone and nature of such support is all important.

In practice, peers did provide valuable moral support and some supervisors played key roles in building student understanding. At the same time, peers could have a

detrimental effect by circulating erroneous information and undermining morale. Supervisors too may not be helpful. The detachment of some supervisors from student study or the separation out practice learning supervision from work supervision, projected an attitude that foundation degree study is irrelevant or something quite detached from practice. Indeed, the peers who do not carry out workplace activities simply reinforce this attitude. These are not intentionally obstructive acts but unwittingly subversive. They convey the lower priority given to the theoretical interpretation of work-based knowledge on the part of supervisors or even discomfort with the demands of academic discussion in a setting that favours training on skills for the job (Thurgate and MacGregor 2008).

Learning agreements

These ambivalences suggest that in foundation degrees, attention needs to be given to the nature of the workplace. In addition to gaining curriculum subject knowledge, students could be facilitated to become aware of the nature of learning through and for work. We propose that this awareness is a kind of meta-learning. Bamber et al (2005) define meta-learning as facilitating students to become more aware of their purposes, learning strategies and understanding of the nature of workplace practices. They describe a process in which what students are learning is intertwined with how they are learning.

Learning agreements may be one way of explicitly addressing meta-learning. The students could be required to enter into learning agreements between their employer and the higher education institution. Learning agreements take a range of different forms but in essence, are formal written agreements between, in this case the learner, the educator and the workplace which detail what is to be learnt, the resources and strategies available to assist in learning, what will be produced as evidence of learning having occurred and how the product will be assessed (Ward 2001). The degree of negotiation available to the parties is likely to vary according to the level of the course and the educational experience of the student (Rickard 2002).

Learning agreements may be beneficial to student learning. For example, Rickard (2002) citing Anderson *et al.* (1994) highlight a number of personal learning benefits such as increased learner commitment and motivation, fostering independence and developing problem-solving skills, providing flexibility in meeting different learning needs, allowing for different styles and paces of learning and developing in users some of the competencies required to undertake fully self-directed learning, engendering a sense of ownership for the learning process. In addition, learning contracts would also to support students in facilitating the active involvement and commitment of employers in their learning and to bring about some congruence between practice goals and study goals. They may also facilitate the kinds of discussions about the difficulties the student may encounter in the workplace and the support they are likely to need.

In addition, learning contracts can make visible the various gains that the students have made through their study. Developing the students' capacity to articulate what they have gained through their study may enable employers, current or potential, to recognise the skills and knowledge their workers have developed. Such recognition may well provide the starting point for the employer-worker negotiations that could lead to changes in work role.

Conclusion

A situated view of learning accentuates the contradictions and ambivalences learning. As Bingham and O'Hara (2007)argue, enabling participation in education is complex and can mean dealing with contradictory agendas. On one level, the students' negotiation of such contradictions and challenges may be seen as important to the learning process. Possibly, such activities are what make for a rounded, self reflecting and autonomous graduate (Molesworth and Scullion 2005). Indeed, it could be argued that learning activities drawing attention to the constraints of the workplace could indeed lead students to have insights into the nature of conditions that limit and constrain, generating inequality and disadvantage. Others may go further developing the political and negotiating skills to overcome such difficulties.

Bateson's (1972) characterisation of level three learning presents the possibility for an optimistic conclusion. He argues that contexts presenting contradictory demands can lead individuals and groups to question and deviate from established norms as well as construct alternative ways of working. A worker group who finds that their employer funds education but does not support connection with their practice or recognition of their qualifications may begin to challenge and change the status quo.

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