Workplace Learning in Curricula: Supervision that Enables Good Learning

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Reference for this occasional paper:

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Introduction

This occasional paper presents important factors in supervision that enable good learning in the workplace, in a CSU context. Factors have been identified from a review of the current literature and extensive experience with workplace learning (WPL) in higher education. CSU's WPL policy (under review) and the Professional and Practice-Based Education Standards provide local context.

The terms "WPL" and "workplace educator" were accepted by CSU Academic Senate (AS 10/43, 2010) as generic terms for use at CSU and will be used in this paper.

**WPL allows students to learn through direct implementation of their professional roles in real workplace settings.**

**WPL educator, also known as clinical educator, clinical facilitator, teacher mentor, supervisor, preceptor, refers to educators who teach and supervise students learning and practice in the workplace. They may be CSU academics or members of staff employed in the workplace by industry partners.**

This paper builds on two previous EFPI occasional papers: WPL Placements in Curricula: Strengths and Challenges and WPL in Curricula: Assessment Design.

Workplace Learning

WPL holds a substantial place in many undergraduate and graduate entry university courses due to increasing demand by government and industry for outcomes-based education and work ready graduates (Barrie, 2006; Litchfield et al., 2010). WPL in curricula provides a setting where students can learn to integrate a range of theoretical knowledge in practice, develop new practice knowledge, demonstrate knowledge application and further develop skills required for practice. The ability to do this effectively in a range of situations can be assessed and help to evaluate the capabilities of students. Creating a good WPL environment is therefore key to achieving the demands of outcomes-based education and work readiness. The workplace educator (supervisor) has a primary role in supporting this learning and this paper will explore some of the key supervision factors that enable good learning.

Teachers, environment and student learning

An understanding of the interrelationship between teachers and the learning environment and its impact on student learning is necessary before embarking on the specific requirements for WPL and the WPL educator. Within the higher education context a number of elements are necessary to create an environment that fosters good learning. Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008, p. 432) draw on a range of literature to identify components that are necessary for an "academic learning environment", one that enables the attainment of knowledge and skills, and promotes an academic approach to learning. Table 1 is adapted from Vermeulen and Schmidt's (2008) review of the literature identifying factors required to promote good learning.

More specifically, Lester and Costley (2010, p. 563) note that to foster good WPL, the work environment must be:

**capable of supporting learner-managed, (and) reflective learning at an appropriate level. While opportunities can often be created around, and sometimes outside of, official work activities for learners who are sufficiently capable and motivated, some level of practical employer support is generally essential.**

A common element arising from the work of Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008) and Lester and Costley (2010) is that a good learning environment is created when high quality support is provided. In the case of WPL, the WPL educator (student supervisor), plays a primary role in providing support and therefore has great potential to impact on student learning. Cooper et al., (2010, p.124) define supervision as: a purposeful activity providing guidance to students in the workplace, enabling them to practise their professional skills and knowledge confidently, safely and effectively ... while maintaining professional standards and commitment to clients.

WPL educators have a multi-faceted role in providing encouragement, critical feedback, mentoring, role modelling and often providing some form of evaluation of student ability (Martin et al., 2011). These roles create environments for students to develop skills and professional attributes, build knowledge and be evaluated. Good WPL educators don’t just teach students specific tasks and skills but enable learning so the complexities of practice can be understood and effectively put into practice in many settings.

CSU’s WPL policy (under review) defines the workplace educator as one who facilitates learning and conducts assessment. WPL educators’ dual role of teacher and assessor is crucial to an effective interrelationship between teachers, environments and learning.

WPL educators: Key factors that enable good learning

The qualities exhibited by workplace educators play a substantial part in setting the tone of learning environments and student learning. Hays and Clements (2011) identify the following qualities as necessary for a good WPL educator: inspiring, approachable, non-threatening, open-minded, patient, supportive, and credible.

Figure 1 displays an overview of the key factors addressed below as capabilities required of WPL educators to facilitate good WPL. These factors reflect the sentiments of Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008) and Hays and Clements (2011). These factors address the WPL educators’ dual role of learning and assessment.

References

- Arends, 2001; Hativa, Barak & Simhi 2001; Kember, 2004
- Elliott et al., 1996; Schunk, 1996
- Hays and Clements, 2010
- Kuh et al., 1991

Table 1. Factors necessary for an academic learning environment (adapted from Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008 p.432)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interaction between staff and students - supportive, cooperative and responsive staff</td>
<td>Arends, 2001; Hativa, Barak &amp; Simhi 2001; Kember, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent feedback to improve learning</td>
<td>Elliott et al., 1996; Schunk, 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher ability to inspire</td>
<td>Hativa, Barak &amp; Simhi, 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher skill and professional development</td>
<td>Newmann, 1993</td>
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<td>Institutional climate or an environment that promotes learning and best educational practice, engages students and creates a sense of support</td>
<td>Kember, 2004; Mackenzie, 1983; Pike &amp; Killian, 2001; Umbach &amp; Wawrzynski, 2005; Walberg, 1981; Kuh et al., 1991</td>
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</table>

Figure 1. Overview of key factors enabling quality learning
Billett (2001, p. 90) argues that if workplace experts fail to guide and have a close relationship with students, the WPL will be “weakened”. The following are required of the WPL educator to facilitate good WPL (Billett, 2001, pp. 98-117):

- a willingness to share knowledge, particularly when it is not easily seen or understood and make it easy to comprehend
- determine and provide access to activities that are required for development plus sequence them in a meaningful way
- provide close guidance that will develop professional practice and guard against inappropriate practice.

Cooper et al. (2010, p. 128) also note the importance of the WPL educator/student relationship. The authors portray the role of the WPL educator as one that challenges and influences students' "ways of thinking and doing" and that to do this a close relationship is required. In WPL, educators need to engage students in reflection by questioning their experience to help them come to new understanding (Dewar & Walker, 1999; IRU, 2012). WPL educators can provide a different perspective that perhaps the student has not seen and stimulate reflection by critical questioning. A facilitative learning environment requires a close, safe, respectful and supportive relationship between both parties (Atack et al., 2000; Billett, 2001; Hughes, 2004; Hays & Clements, 2011). If you are a WPL educator or have direct involvement with these educators, the following question may help to stimulate thought on how to develop more fully this factor required for enabling good WPL.

Reflection point: How can you strengthen your relationship with students or enhance WPL educators' ability to do so?

2. Effective communication (specifically feedback)

Effective communication is essential to good interpersonal relationships and therefore effective learning. Facilitating (helping and guiding) learning is a key role of the WPL educator and as defined in the CSU WPL Policy (under review). Effective communication, a two way process where the message is delivered and received accurately, is essential to facilitate learning.

Feedback is one of the key factors in learning as it provides correction, guidance, benchmarking and reinforcement. Feedback for correction however is very different to feedback that enables future development. Effective feedback for future development is one where the learner understands the information being given and is willing to act (Price et al., 2010). The most important aspect of feedback is that it raises students' awareness of their ability and "their capacity to reflect" (Cooper et al., 2010, p. 122). Information regarding a deficiency in ability must identify gaps, provide advice and guidance to foster the student's capacity for reflection and future development (Price et al., 2020).

Students require regular constructive feedback to give them the greatest chance of success in attaining the educational goals set for the WPL subject. The Innovative Research Universities (IRU, 2012) comprises seven comprehensive Australian universities; they have produced a toolkit containing a number of resources for employers and industry. The resource - Roles and responsibilities of the workplace supervisor, identifies that constructive feedback should be:

- individual & pertinent
- directed towards learning goals
- timely & expected
- focused on behaviour that can be modified
- positive & encouraging
- collaborative
- focused on change and free from value judgements
- easy to understand
- respectful
- checking the student's perceptions
- noted in writing, and
- followed up at a later date.

Reflection point: Is feedback considered as both a means for correction and future development?

3. Motivational ability of WPL educators

The relationship between WPL educators and students, and the workplace environment will have a direct effect on students’ motivation for learning. The workplace environment is influenced by staff employed there and the workplace culture or climate.

Personal qualities, experiences, values, belief systems and world views held by students and WPL educators will impact on their relationship and therefore students’ motivation for learning (Cooper et al., 2010). A qualitative study investigating the student-staff relationship and its impact on learning noted that students very quickly (usually on the first day) identified those staff members who exhibited expertise, a willingness to teach, be a mentor and role model, from those who did not (Atack et al., 2000). The authors note that on the first day the students’ judgements about staff influenced learning for the remainder of the placement.

A WPL environment will motivate learners if it has a culture of learning, provides support for learning at an appropriate level and monitors the learning conditions (Orrell, 2004). Part of this culture for learning is ensuring that staff workload is such that support and monitoring of student learning is manageable. Sometimes staff find students an additional workload while at other times they find them of assistance (Atack et al., 2000). If staff workload is too high it will negatively impact on teaching and therefore student learning.

An effective WPL educator will be able to identify barriers to learning either from characteristics of individuals or the workplace and try to counter them. A WPL educator who demonstrates expertise and a passion for what they do as professionals and teachers will inspire students to achieve their highest ability and create a desire to work towards excellence.

Reflection point: We may think that the learner is the only one responsible for their motivation for learning and fail to recognise the influence educators and the environment have on this motivation. What are the greatest barriers to motivate learning?

4. Expert role models

Observation is one of the means by which students learn, particularly in learning how to manage difficult circumstances (Billett, 2001; Cooper et al., 2010). Role models are those whose behaviours, attitudes, practices are copied by others therefore expert and professional role models are required to demonstrate quality practice (Filstad, 2010). Expertise is readily identified by learners and as a result they trust that the behaviours and practices exhibited are ones that they should emulate. On the other hand, negative role models with poor work quality are identified by students and not emulated (Atack et al., 2000; Filstad, 2010).

Billett (2001, p. 98 and p. 114) identifies there is a risk with this indirect form of learning because the observation of the conduct of work practices may produce undesirable, unintended learning (hidden curriculum). Such undesirable learning may include unsuitable short cuts, unsafe work practices, and unprofessional behaviours.

Role models are an important knowledge source especially since attitudes and values are learned by observation. It is important then, that those being observed are aware of the effect their behaviour may have on another’s learning and take a reflective stance to modify as needed. This principle is echoed in the P&PBE Standards Standard 25: “Recognise and address the risks inherent in any mal-alignment between the hidden and planned curricula” and 46: “WPL site-based staff (in adequate numbers) provide sound role models and supervision as practitioners of the occupation/profession”.

Reflection point: Are all students able to distinguish between good and bad role models? If not, in what ways are students prepared to purposefully reflect and distinguish between the diverse role models they may meet in WPL?

5. Professional judgement and assessment

WPL assessment is identified by Cooper et al., (2010) as one of the most complex forms of assessment because of the variables surrounding evaluation of student performance in the workplace.
The broad topic of assessment broadly was addressed in WPL in Curricula: Assessment design. Here I focus on WPL educators’ professional judgement of deep learning. Cooper et al. (2010, p. 100) argue that a key challenge in WPL assessment is that it should assess “higher order thinking in practice” which is demonstrated by evidence-based reasoning that can be effectively applied in a range of situations. This is the opposite of surface learning, where the learner has learned what to do in a specific situation but is not capable of adapting appropriately to a range of situations. As noted in the introduction of this paper, WPL is a key learning environment to develop and assess students’ ability to integrate theory with practice. In other words, learning including assessment and feedback, should be focused on developing the students’ understanding of why they are doing something, what the consequences of the action may be, how to modify it under certain conditions and how to proceed when something is unknown.

WPL educators must be capable of evaluating the students’ ability to effectively demonstrate the complexities of practice at different stages of the course. When judging students’ performances, WPL educators need to be cognisant of this higher order thinking in practice. A failure by WPL educators to look for this deeper learning may inaccurately provide an assessment about students’ performance and therefore give a false sense of ability. Cooper et al. (2010) point out that a misunderstanding on the students’ part regarding their limitations or ability can put the organisation, clients and students at risk. The credibility of assessment is a crucial point in learning and WPL educators must make a professional judgement, to determine if students have demonstrated higher order thinking in practice. Sound assessment reduces risks to the organisation, client and student.

In a review paper of Australian speech pathologist WPL assessment, the authors identify a number of factors that aid in enhancing a more accurate judgement of performance. In this study McAllister et al. (2010) noted the following as necessary aids:

- global judgements rather than drilling down to checkpoints help to promote an holistic approach to evaluation of performance,
- clearly defined assessment documentation that includes competencies and standards must be provided to guide the WPL educators’ global judgements, and
- the rating of performance has sufficient evidence (quantity and quality) to support it.

This last point regarding sufficient evidence is crucial to the concept of higher order thinking in practice. The authors note that observation of students working in a wide range of situations is necessary to reduce the impact of case specificity i.e. observing a single case which may not be representative of the student’s overall performance. The evidence thus needs to include observation in a range of conditions, over time to ensure sound judgement of ability.

The following P&BE Standards reflect the points addressed in this section. (33) Assessment methods promote learning as well as evaluating the students’ practice. (47) Site-based WPL staff are well informed about the relevant university curriculum and student learning/preparation prior to placements. (48) Staff development programs are available for site-based WPL staff. CSU’s WPL Policy (under review) also supports this notion of professional development opportunities for WPL staff.

Reflection point: Is assessment conducted in a manner that ensures that performance has been observed and recorded over time and under a range of conditions that are expected for the stage of the student’s development?

Conclusion

WPL educators play a primary role in students’ learning in the workplace. To effect good WPL, it is necessary in the first instance to understand what impacts on learning, and this paper has presented some important factors. WPL educators are key to students’ learning, particularly integration of theory with practice and the accurate evaluation of their performance. It is important then that universities provide support to enable WPL educators to do their role well (Cooper et al., 2010; Hays & Clements, 2011). Building good relationships, providing feedback, the impact of behaviour (workplace and individual) on learning, as well as assessment of higher order thinking in practice are just some of the areas needed for continuing professional development.

References


List of references from Table 1


Links

