

# Work-related learning - a matter of principle/s?

**Sabine McKinnon** looks at a topic of widespread interest to today's students: "what exactly is work-related learning, and what will it do for me?" The principles she developed with colleagues at Glasgow Caledonian University, embedded as they are in fundamental pedagogic theory, are applicable to all disciplines and offer a helpful guide for those of us involved in course design in teacher education at any level.

Work-related learning has been the subject of considerable debate in the HE sector for some time now. In the Scottish context the recent publication of the Funding Council's *Learning to Work 2 Consultation Paper* has led to a renewed interest in employability as a graduate attribute (SFC, 2009). The new QAA enhancement theme (Graduates for the 21st century) also re-emphasises HE's task of embedding employability in its core provision.

As a result all institutions will have to address some important questions. What learning and teaching activities help our students to become competent professionals after they leave the campus? What constitutes work-related learning in a university?

Should it be left to vocational programmes or can it be embedded in all subject disciplines?

These were the questions I had to address when I started my job as Lecturer in Employability at

Glasgow Caledonian University. In my pursuit for answers I came across huge amounts of documentation: books and journal articles, policy papers and toolkits but I could not find a clear definition. The official ►

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► QCA definition refers to work-related learning as "...planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work" (QCA, 2003). It is wide open to interpretation. Does "learning *about* work" occur when students are listening to a lecture on the role of women in the workplace or when they are shadowing a female manager in industry? Can both activities be classed as work-related learning?

At Glasgow Caledonian University we needed an answer. Our new Learning, Teaching and

Assessment Strategy requires all schools to improve their students' employability skills through work-related learning. A new university-wide strategic initiative, named the Real WoRLD project (Realising work-related learning diffusion) was set up to advise staff on embedding it in the curriculum. As the manager of the project I needed to provide my colleagues with a benchmark for good practice. Working in close collaboration with my colleague Dr. Anoush Margaryan who has considerable research expertise in the field, I devised a set of five key principles of work-related learning which are based on contemporary theories of learning and pedagogic research.

The idea of using basic pedagogic principles to inform teaching practice is not new. In 2002 Merrill defined a "first principle of instruction" as "a relationship that is always true... regardless of programme or practice" (Merrill, 2002). Principles can be implemented in any course, in any subject and with any cohort of learners. They are designed to address *how* rather than *what* we teach our students. We have illustrated the principles with reflective questions. Good practice examples from Glasgow Caledonian contextualise them. For a full set of references and examples, please consult our website [www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/realworld](http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/realworld)

## Principles of work-related learning

Work-related learning activities should be designed so that they:

### 1. provide students with learning opportunities to integrate theory and practice

- Are students involved in authentic activities that match as nearly as possible the real-world tasks of professional practices in a given discipline?
- Do the activities enable students to experience both good and bad examples of work they are expected to produce, processes they are expected to employ or behaviours they are expected to demonstrate in the workplace?
- Are the activities designed in such a way that students can only carry them out in collaboration with others?

### 2. achieve learning outcomes that state what the students will be able to do in the workplace

- Do the outcomes identify the standard of the expected performance rather than what the students will 'know about', 'understand' or 'describe'?
- Are learning outcomes assessed authentically, i.e. through methods that resemble as closely as possible the ways in which performance is assessed in the workplace?

### 3. encourage and support students' interest in a wide variety of careers

- Do the activities enable students to build upon, relate or apply knowledge and skills from relevant past experiences?
- Does the learning process demand the application and transfer of knowledge into a new professional context or setting, beyond the ones they worked on during the course?

### 4. require students to take on an active rather than a passive role in the learning process

- Does the task require that students demonstrate critical, independent thinking?
- Are students involved in risk-taking associated with new behaviours?
- Are they supported in coping with resulting levels of anxiety?

### 5. accommodate cultural diversity

- Are students offered a range of national and international work-related learning opportunities?
- Do learning activities accommodate culturally diverse value systems, learning styles and modes of communication and interaction?
- Have students acquired a level of cross-cultural competence that allows them to function effectively in a multi-cultural work environment?

## References

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Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education, *Learning to Work 2 consultation: developing the Council's employability strategy*, 15 May 2009, SFC /03/2009 C. Available on-line at [www.sfc.ac.uk/news\\_events\\_circulars/Consultations/2009/SFC0309C.aspx](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/news_events_circulars/Consultations/2009/SFC0309C.aspx)



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