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Building a risky-safe-space: Using reflective pedagogies and values to support writing development in work based learning

Introduction

The concepts of 'graduateness' and graduate attributes became contested terrain (Wald & Harland, 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017) before COVID-19 destabilised even the most assured of shared learning constructions. Indeed, for those of us immersed in the delivery of work-based learning (WBL), this has long been the case. Learners join WBL programmes with often extensive learning experiences and practice knowledge, and with their own organisationally-infused version of those attributes that might typically be construed as facets of 'graduateness', related to, for example, reasoning, adopting an analytical perspective, effective communication, knowledge and information management, integrity and tolerance (Hager & Holland, 2006). For these students, already engaged in full time careers, the lure of 'employability' may be arguably more muted than for those graduates completing HE qualifications through a more traditional undergraduate or postgraduate attendance-based route. However, all WBL learners commit to a programme of personal and professional development (PPD) in addition to expanding their subject-specific expertise in the knowledge that they are either consolidating or enhancing their existing strengths and experience.

It is the process of mapping existing professional competences and not-as-yet-graduate-attributes to those of the conventions of study in HE that merits a considered, learner centred approach that draws on both academic and professional literacies (Lea & Street, 2004, 2006; Canton, Govan & Zahn, 2018). A reductive positioning of 'skills' in this context jars with the intent of taking a holistic approach to supporting and developing the practitioner-graduate. Central to this is the opportunity to engage students in meaningful, agentic, professionally-aligned reflective practices (Helyer, 2015a; Fergusson, van der Laan, & Baker, 2019) as a scaffolded route to promoting self-awareness and developing confidence in applying competences from the professional domain to the academic (and vice versa).

This paper shares an account of taking an embedded approach to supporting the development of academic literacies amongst work-based learners in one UK HEI. In particular, it will consider the use of reflective pedagogical tools and values in supporting work-based learners to become confident and adaptable writers. Discussion considers how work-based pedagogies and approaches may have far-reaching relevance in a post-pandemic landscape, where reskilling and professional agility are likely to become more prolific aspects of education and work. Writing itself is framed as an integrated communication practice that encompasses literature retrieval, reading, evaluation, synthesis and articulation of argument.

The paper will describe pre-pandemic academic support activities and share qualitative survey data in which students consider their confidence as both professional and academic writers. It concludes with consideration of how some of the approaches outlined may have relevance for the wider academic community.

Key words: *work-based learning, academic literacies, reflective pedagogies*

Context

Work-based learning and reflective pedagogies

Work-based learning must, by design, be negotiated, flexible and inclusive (Wall, 2013, 2017; Ferrández-Berruenco, Kekale, and Devins, 2016). Garnett (2005) describes WBL as the practice by which university-level knowledge and learning practices are applied to the professional domain, with the express aim of attaining recognition and gaining/ applying knowledge and capabilities to achieve particular accredited outcomes of importance to the learner, their employer and the university.

WBL foregrounds the relationship between and requirements of the workplace and the learner as opposed to being entirely subject driven (Boud and Solomon, 2001), opening opportunities for innovative and dialogic curricular decision making. As such, experiential and reflective pedagogies, based on learning from achievement and reifying aspiration, drive learning design in a way that encourages and engages learners to not only assume responsibility but to challenge, disrupt and develop. Students are encouraged to adopt responsibility, pursue inquiry and develop self-direction to become heutagogical learners (Canning, 2010; Blaschke, 2012), taking risky steps to examine their professional milieu and role therein.

One criticism of WBL has been its (potentially unintentional) role in endorsing or perpetuating entrenched organisational or social structures (Trehan & Rigg, 2015; Wall & Perrin, 2015) though, increasingly, exploratory perspectives aim to open discussion on the role and impact that critical pedagogies may have in contesting this (Wall et al, 2017; Wall & Jarvis, 2015). Helyer (2015a) argues that a postmodern approach to WBL encourages a reflective perspective that focuses not just on existing experience, but on what is being and will be learned; to 'question the "correct" order of things' (p. 21) and to remove boundaries, "safety" and to introduce an element of fear (Helyer, 2007). Helyer (2015a) does, however, acknowledge the importance of trust and a supportive tutor-student and peer community in encouraging students to surface critical observations and reflections. If not a contradiction in terms, then, we suggest that an exploratory risky-safe-space is required for impactful, reflective learning to occur. This may not happen without discomfort, and may require students to "un-learn" some aspects of their practice (Helyer, 2015b).

WBL pedagogies make use of principles of reflexivity, agreement and goal-setting. In practice this means student assessments may include negotiated, individual learning agreements (Garnett, 2012) or other forms of goal setting (e.g. SWOT analyses), reflective critical analyses, structured professional discussions or role-context-related project work (Boud & Costley, 2007). A subtle distinction should also be noted in the differing functions of implementing processes/ technologies of reflection versus those of self-assessment (Desjarlais & Smith, 2011), namely being that whilst one empowers learners to meaningfully analyse participation in a particular incident, the other facilitates focus for future development. Both perspectives can collaboratively contribute to a depth of self-knowledge which in turn supports the identification of professional priorities and practical routes to pursuing their achievement.

Institute for University to Business Education (IU2B)

The Institute for University to Business Education (IU2B) at Glasgow Caledonian University works with partnership organisations to design and deliver bespoke undergraduate and postgraduate professionally aligned programmes. Subject areas include railway operations,

business and management and education. All IU2B learners are employed in full time posts, and the Institute explicitly acknowledges the unique demands of WBL as part of the support model provided for students.

IU2B students are based in both the UK as well as in South Africa as part of our Transnational partnership. Teaching delivery is blended, with, pre-pandemic, flying faculty delivering face-to-face classes (both in the UK and SA) multiple times a year. Teaching is typically front-loaded, with instruction-based activity happening at the commencement of each academic module. Thereafter, regular online tutorials, webinars and group discussion support learning during assessment preparation, and individual online synchronous and email communication with lecturers and tutors provide both ad hoc and structured contact throughout each module.

Embedded within the student learning framework is targeted support for the development of academic literacies. Academic Development Tutors (ADTs) are members of academic staff with a specific teaching remit that focusses on supporting students to develop confidence in engaging in key academic practices, supporting learners to enhance existing competences in a structured, embedded and developmental way. The ADT role exists in each of the University's academic schools, again, with the express purpose of providing contextualised learning support. The ADT community base their support on an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 2004, 2006) in considering communication practices as contextually dependent, situated and conversational (depending on intended format or audience). The ADTs also make use of professional literacies (Canton, Govan & Zahn, 2018) in encouraging learners to engage with their occupational context, vocabulary, values and community. The powerful confluence of academic and professional literacies offers students an element of the security that Helyer notes as essential in supporting learners to become effective reflective practitioners and in allowing them to adopt experimental and mutable writer identities. In providing this safety, the ADTs encourage risk. offering 'testbed' spaces, such as virtual writing retreats, to allow students access to protected, 'low stakes' opportunities to write for specific purposes and audiences, and to receive feedforward on aspects of their written communication, use of evidence and approach to structure. This dialogue happens between student and ADT, and agreed priority areas for development become the student's responsibility in an ongoing and applied way.

Pre-pandemic model and underpinning rationale

IU2B academic support model

The IU2B academic support model has been designed to provide a multimodal, embedded, continuous and nuanced framework of support. Noting the influence of competing demands on our students' experience, the model incorporates open-access, on-demand learning resources and synchronous support as well as in-module formative support and synchronous virtual drop ins. These activities are co-ordinated and undertaken by the ADTs, who work collaboratively with lecturers, tutors and subject matter experts (from industry or in partner HEIs) to provide a suite of materials and one-to-one/ class support that are aligned with WBL principles of self-direction, continuous development and heutagogy, and which focus on articulating professional knowledge through an academic lens.

Academic support activities include:

- Pre-entry support. Self-directed, online resources that clarify key learning conventions and practices;

- Transition support at the commencement of a module. Generic and bespoke learning resources to support students to develop writing practices and use of evidence, often specific to their assessment;
- Open access academic development FAQs and resources in support of using handheld devices for mobile learning;
- In-module webinars to support assessment preparation;
- Individual and generalised feed-forward for students as part of formative assessments;
- Ad hoc support requests received to shared ADT email inbox;
- Multiple weekly virtual drop-in sessions;
- Bridging support for students wishing to progress to the next level of study;
- Virtual writing retreats.

Whilst the support we discuss here in by no means exceptional in an HE setting, the approach that we take is nuanced to reflect the unique experience of our learners. WBL learners encounter similar challenges to any learner in post compulsory education, though the impact on the management of their studies may be different. Potential dissonance between the complementary yet distinct aspects of the practitioner-graduate identity create a space where clarity, security, flexibility and responsibility shape expectations and interactions. Thus, the pedagogical approaches already noted that incorporate reflexivity, agreement and goal-setting offer tangible ways in which learners can co-create meaningful learning and assessment experiences in the risky-safe-space we endorse. Helyer's encouragement to make WBL both retrospective and forward looking incites a continuum of recognition, evaluation, acceptance and subsequent development of student abilities and competences. The WBL learner is an active participant at each of these stages, lending further strength to the partnership model of learning and teaching.

Clarity, security and responsibility as design and operational principles

Distilling the agentic values of WBL theory into practice, the academic support model we have devised rests on three key principles; clarity, security and responsibility. At the core of each of these priorities lies the aspiration to provide self-determined, dialogic and authentic learning for our students to become confident writers in multiple and mutable contexts, experimenting with technique and tone in our risky-safe-space. The following examples, we hope, speak to how some of our practices may extend to have relevance for other practitioner and student communities. All are inherently reflexive practices that ask the student to mindfully hold their development at all times.

Clarity

As with all colleagues engaged in supporting the development of academic literacies, technologies which promote transparency are vital to our practice; making the implicit explicit (Homer & Ramsay, 1999). One example of how we operationalise this is in the form of what we term our 'Academic support guide', a 25 page document outlining guidance on structuring written work, applying academic conventions, paragraph construction, writing introductions/ conclusions and developing a systematic approach to using evidence and referencing. We intend that each student has a digital or paper copy of this guide to use as reference during the

writing process. This is particularly important for our Transnational students who may not always have access to a reliable data connection to retrieve web based materials. The onus is on each student to, in concert with feedback, make critical reflective decisions on which areas of the guide are relevant for their development.

Security

Providing a bounded, experimental space for students to develop writing practice and confidence is an aspect of writing development practices on which we have anecdotal evidence that students appreciate and value. Again, in response to the diversity of our learner demographic and associated personal and professional responsibilities, we provide multiple routes for engagement in these type of events to offer a broad reach, flexible participation and to maximise relevance. One example of providing a 'risky-safe-space' is offering feedforward on formative assessments. At the pre-submission and planning stage of an assessment, students are invited to submit, for example, an introduction, first paragraph, outline structure based and typically one reference on their interpretation of the assessment brief. They then feedforward on academic writing tone, structure of the introduction and paragraph, intended flow of the essay and referencing technique. This is intended to provide a developmental point of reflection and to allow students to reconsider their writing at a crucial interim stage. It also provides a point of discussion in supporting students to take ownership of their writing process and management and to identify particular writing tendencies that may benefit from modification or consistency.

Responsibility

As working professionals, we respect our learners as agentic, insightful individuals who have the autonomy to develop into whatever type of writer they wish/ require to be. The opportunities presented in fusing the dual practitioner-graduate identity are many, and our facilitation of writing retreats, virtual or in person, and so-named as they are agreed protected periods of the academic programme away from work responsibilities, pass much of the accountability to our learners. In order for the dedicated time to be useful, students must engage in preparatory work, completing a workbook that allows them to recognise strengths in their writing confidence as well as to identify areas for development. We also ask that students set writing goals for the duration of the retreat to they have a mark against which to measure achievement at the close of the session. Students take part in structured discussions and free-writing tasks during the retreat. This means they are expected to be prepared and also to be actively engaged. It is the responsibility of the student to keep focus during the writing tasks in order to have a self-defined aspect of their assessment progressed at the session's conclusion, and to provide a reflection point for their ongoing development.

Insight and student voice

Insight not impact

We appreciate that our role as writing development practitioners is but one element of possible influence in a complex WBL ecosystem. Existing student confidence, varying professional

contexts and demands and diverse requirements of academic programmes contribute to a nuanced experience for each student that cannot be homogenised in terms of assuming or constructing learner identity or confidence. From this point of view, we refrain from considering the ‘efficiency’ of our contribution in isolation, but rather hope to explore ways in which our dialogue and contribution may have shaped students’ writing confidence and how professional writer identities might have emerged and evolved. We do this by collecting student reflections, as part of wider student experience questionnaires, regarding examining experiences of writing for academic purposes and adapting these practices for use in a professional context. Data shared here is from an evaluation questionnaire collected in 2020 across HE certificate, diploma, degree and honours level transnational students (overall n=68). The questionnaire was circulated at the end of the programme when students could reflect back holistically on their experiences and learning.

Insights shared here are intended to suggest subtle ways in which students have experienced changed (improved) confidence in their communication. By virtue of the questions being asked of students who had engaged with our support, those who have not, or whose existing writing confidence is of a high standard, are not part of this sample. We make no generalisation, but rather share illustrative quotations by way of experiential observations (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006; Eldh, Årestedt and Berterö, 2020) which speak to the depth of experience and not universality.

In qualitative responses to questions asking for perceptions about useful guidance, application and usefulness of feedforward, clarification of assessment-specific requirements, writing for different audiences and support with use of rigorous evidence in writing were all highlighted as aspects of academic work that impacted on students’ sense of confidence and achievement. Indeed, writing confidence featured in student reflections of ‘best’ personal or professional experiences of engaging in learning on their programme.

Specific areas of focus for writer improvement

In prefacing understanding students’ writing development and adapted practices, we were interested to surface which technical/ practical aspects of academic writing students wished to explore in dialogue. Understanding assignment briefs, building self-confidence, seeking guidance on academic writing conventions (such as structure and referencing), developing academic writing style and improving understanding of plagiarism in writing were all mentioned in student responses. Students specifically said they had requested “*feedback on how I have addressed the questions*”, assistance with “*structure, grammar and overall presentation*” or requested guidance as to whether “*I am on the right track in terms of academic writing*”. This latter comment is one we find ourselves challenging again and again, and probing more fully with a student what they actually mean – is the ‘right track’ the focus, tone, structure, evidence base? For all that we embed clarity as a core value in the design and delivery of all our teaching resources, we impart the responsibility to reciprocate this on to our students too.

Meaningful interactions

We were obviously interested, too, in what forms of guidance may have been impactful for students’ writer confidence. Receipt and application of feedforward, managing time, maintaining focus, understanding the assignment, accurate and systematic referencing and the

importance of a rigorous evidence base featured as aspects of dialogue that students had found meaningful. We were particularly encouraged by comments that appreciated and referred to the impact of “*constructive criticism to allow room for improvement*” and students taking confidence and ownership from experimental writing opportunities where “*in class they encourage me to think out of the box and not be scared to try new ideas*” and suggesting that “*if you become lost, take a step back (reflect) and breathe, this will help to remain focused and intensify your clarity when you return to your task*”. These subtle indications of writer autonomy echo the disruption we hope to facilitate in exploring the evolution of the practitioner-graduate identity and widening experience and confidence in writing for multiple audiences. An increasing awareness of the imperative to “*always consult another person’s view on your opinions/views*” additionally speaks to a changing perspective of assuring an evidence base for WBL and professionally aligned activities. This is arguably an important threshold concept (Meyer and Land, 2003; 2005) for the practitioner-graduate that opens up lifelong learning opportunities to meaningfully fuse the professional and academic domains.

Articulation of achievement, confidence and professional application

On developing writer confidence in the context of their overall academic programme, students remarked that they perceived their “*best experience is the academic writing and research*” or “*report writing, assignment structuring and referencing*”. The fact that students saw value in developing these practices and competences is insightful in articulating them as meaningful, integrated professional practices. Students also noted meaningfulness and value observed in the explicit practices of, for example, knowing how to “*read the instructions, questions and understand them*”, to “*proofread my work thoroughly, use reliable sources and reliable literature*” and “*to link paragraphs and ideas*”. Spending time developing these facets of learning occur in a context of promoting student confidence to recognise that in reflecting on previous experience and strengths “*I do have the skills to perform good work*”.

On developing communication for impactful professional practice, one student acknowledged that their “*writing skills improved. In my line of work I sometimes have to chair certain meetings, these now have a more structured approach*”. Here, writing becomes an active part of communication, and engagement with the importance of structure and coherence is extended to the student’s role in industry. Reinforcing this global view of communication as a collection of academic/ professional literacies, another student commented that their most valuable experiences related to “*writing a report and to better communicate with my team and (be) involved in the process of executing my job*”. This holistic view of the importance of communication confidence learned and applied resonated with a further student who stated “*I feel so proud of being a student as now I understand how to communicate with my colleagues and customers*”.

What changed? Pandemic response

Responding/ adjusting to the impact of Covid

Like every department in every HEI across the world, IU2B had to provide a rapid response in adapting learning and teaching practices and priorities as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic gathered pace (Nordman et al, 2020; Adnan and Anwar, 2020). Travel restrictions obviously

meant a cessation to face-to-face teaching activities, but given the existing blended and distance nature of much of programme delivery, mechanisms already existed where continuity of provision was arguably not as profoundly interrupted as for those colleagues quickly tasked with finding pedagogically sound and inclusive alternatives to attendance based engagement. However, things were in no way ‘business as usual’.

One notable difference was the disruptive influence of the mandate to work from home, both for our UK-based and South African learners. Particularly for our transnational students, workplace network and hardware access is crucial in being able to manage and complete assignments and stay connected to their programme. Imposed changes to usual modes of studying in the workplace were felt acutely by our students; for some due to increased workload and less time to study, for others as a result of the equivalent of furlough and no access to a computer or laptop and for many, unavoidable poor health of themselves or a loved one. Considerations around private/ personal access to technology (Rapanata et al, 2020) became a consideration as IU2B strove to provide connectedness and continuity to our students during the most uncertain of times.

One response was the creation of online guidance on using mobile or handheld personal devices for learning purposes. Whilst not intended to promote, for example, the authorship of an entire essay on a smartphone, the web-based resources aimed to offer accessible advice to students on ways that they might be able to leverage technology already in their possession (so at no extra cost) to progress their learning or assessment-related tasks, such as note-making, planning, reading or section drafting. Guidance included text-to-speech or speech-to-text accessibility features built into operating systems as well as suggestions on free apps. Caution was advised on potential costs of downloading specific apps if a student was using their own data plan and not a public wifi connection. Between July and October 2020, the blog received 445 visitors, with resources on using mobile devices to undertake tasks related to writing being the most popular and viewed.

Self-direction as agentic, reflective practice

Greater focus, too, was offered to self-directed academic support materials, in the acknowledgment that students may engage in learning at unpredictable times. A repository of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) was made available to students with the intention that on-demand writing support was available out of expected teaching hours. An element of reflective, evaluative learner practice and self-awareness is implied within this, in inviting students to consider which dimensions of their writing or learning would benefit from developmental support.

One perhaps inevitable outcome of the pervasive use of reflective pedagogical approaches during the pandemic was that professionally-related scenarios, critical incidents or reflexive self-evaluations identified by students for use in assessment became increasingly infused with aspects of working in the context of Covid. The personal-professional boundaries, already often delicate to manage in reflection, became even more granulated and indivisible, with many students affected by poor health, displacement, staff shortage and interruption of their studies. More than ever, learner self-awareness is vital in determining critically appropriate events or situations from which students can learn and develop. A compassionate approach within our risky-safe-space was required in guiding students towards writing constructive accounts, helping them to identify parts of writing that may have been emotionally descriptive or unstructured and without relevance. Encouraging students to apply reflective models to

unstructured sections or to examine overall relevance to the assessment's developmental outcome were some of the ways in which we discursively approached adapting writing practices.

Discussion/ implications

Workforce futures

Covid, of course, not only impacts on learning delivery but on the role of the university in facilitating a, perhaps, adapted version of graduate attributes for the post-pandemic workplace. The ripple effect of the pandemic may lead to the need for new, adjusted or multiple occupations or professional perspectives, and as such the nature of HEI as providers of learning will change. This, too, necessitates a need for writers to be adaptable to differing contexts.

Milligan and Kennedy (2017) describe the Higher Education degree as the most trusted and transferrable form of educational currency in allowing graduates access to the workplace. As has been argued in the introductory section of this paper, the traditional, linear mode of acquiring such a qualification, and the anticipated, associated competences of 'graduateness', have muted relevance for those engaged in WBL study. Ever-increasing education, development and accreditation opportunities in a post-pandemic landscape have seen exponential uptake of short courses, upskilling modules and micro-credentialised learning, meaning more and more people are engaging in a loose form of work-based learning. Responsiveness and agility is a defining characteristic of WBL learners (Boyd, 2020), and in the context of current economic and social uncertainties and complexities, could be suggested to become a more prominent, non-tangible attribute expected of those graduating from HE study. For the practitioner-graduate, inhabiting a liminal space and transitioning between multiple identities (novice, expert, writer, author, student, researcher, graduate...) throughout study, adaptability and flexibility is an embedded and vital component of professional learning, and a continuously negotiated facet of the WBL experience that acts as the nexus between the professional and academic domain.

What can we share?

If current and future student cohorts, then, are likely to comprise learners with multiple potential past or present professional identities and, as such, a tome of narratives on confidence, competence, engagement and focus, we gently and respectfully suggest there may be scope within our mooted principles of clarity, security and responsibility to be applied to aspects of extended academic practice. More of those students following a more traditional, attendance-based route to study will begin to share the characteristics of work-based learners, though shades of the practitioner-graduate experience, we know, have been long standing for all students who, through necessity have professions to consider and families to care for. More will have to take writing risks, and more will require the risky-safe-space in which to become different writers for different purposes. Writing, as a transferrable communication practice, happens in increasingly diverse settings, for increasingly diverse purposes, and encouraging students to draw on existing confidence and competence to consider their audience encourages empowerment. Dialogue and structured activities informed by clarity, safety and responsibility can prove to be the motivation for improved criticality, autonomy and self-efficacy in

supporting students to merge their practitioner-graduate strengths. We encourage this open approach as a way of respecting learner autonomy and making aspirations achievable.

Conclusion

Reflexivity and the use of reflective pedagogies are central tenets of delivering work based education. Whilst these approaches are very clearly not new, their role and impact has changed irrevocably, not just mid-pandemic, but with a view to the future of WBL itself. Current WBL students must navigate the already treacherous terrain of the personal/professional divide (or confluence) to meaningfully engage in reflective learning, and we as academic literacy practitioners have a discursive role in supporting wayfinding that lies in balance and appropriacy (of language and writing practice as opposed to content). We already consider the demands and priorities of our students (the practitioner-graduate) to be often competing– we actively acknowledge and surface these tensions with our students and know these contested priorities are increasingly felt by all learners, regardless of mode of attendance. We try to do this by being (virtually, synchronously and asynchronously) present and engaged in ongoing conversations, relating to development, focus and advancement. Uncertainty will continue to be a certainty, and we embrace that in supporting our learners and developing our model.

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