

Snapshot of a generation: bridging the theory-practice divide with project-based learning

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In this example from the human services field, project-based learning is used to connect theoretical knowledge and practice skills by taking a project from industry and completing it within the peer supported learning environment of the classroom, returning the project product to industry. The theoretical ideal of participation was the project's goal and the way Snapshot of a generation fulfilled this goal on several levels is discussed. The benefits of project-based learning are an injection of new perspectives and energy from students to the workplace, completion of tasks that human services workers view as important but do not have time to do, and critically important workplace experience for students in an environment of peer support and learning. Project-based learning is a subversion of the usual practicum because of the way abstract theory is embedded in the doing rather than separate from it.

Introduction

Contemporary adult/tertiary education in the human services field incorporates a number of approaches to facilitate students' learning of knowledge and skills. Varied classroom teaching methods, simulated workplaces and workplace practicums all offer ways of connecting theoretical knowledge with practice or constructed knowledge (Healy 2005). While the importance of practical learning strategies has long been recognised (Kilpatrick 1918), debates about quantifying or qualifying the way practice builds knowledge have continued (Goldstein 2001, Shardlow & Dole 1996).

This paper discusses one solution to overcoming the theory-practice dichotomy by using problem-based learning with human services students. Following an outline of the theoretical knowledge /practice skills debate, problem-based learning is defined and the participation project *Snapshot of a generation* is described. The project outcomes are discussed and the way in which theory and knowledge were interconnected in the project is highlighted.

Theoretical knowledge versus practical skills

The vocational education and training (VET) sector's focus on training for competence has apparently widened the gap between knowledge and skills. Theoretical knowledge is the province of universities while registered training organisations develop trainees' ability to 'simply perform skills' (Ling 1999:1) presumably without necessarily knowing *why* they do them. In the human services field where practitioners engage with society's most vulnerable and disadvantaged members, knowing both how and why one takes a particular course of action is vital to working ethically and effectively (Bowles, Collingridge, Curry & Valentine 2006).

The VET sector provides a substantial part of the human services workforce, particularly in non-government organisations that bear

the brunt of neo-liberal social policy with decreasing resources and increasing demand the norm (Alston 2002). VET courses – diplomas, certificates – are shorter and cheaper than university courses and are developed and adapted to industry changes via consultation with industry representatives (TAFENSW 2005). Competencies are said to be the industry standard in whichever skill group they define performance.

The challenge for VET trainers/trainers in the human services field is to turn competency standards into locally relevant learning experiences that result in useful employees. This is particularly important in rural areas where employers, trainers, service consumers and students are likely to come into contact socially and professionally for years to come. The well-being of rural communities relies on a well-trained and active civil society (non-government human services) sector (Alston 2002). Developing the connection between theoretical perspectives and related practical strategies in real local examples is the goal of the teacher/trainer's project outlined in this paper.

Project-based learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is a comprehensive instructional approach to engage students in sustained, cooperative investigation (Bransford & Stein 1993). It is most commonly found in secondary education in the United States of America. It has been referred to also as problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning (Bransford & Stein 1993).

In the PBL approach, students are required to answer a question or develop a product for example. In doing this it is felt that they are able to take control of the learning environment and process, working in groups to complete a series of tasks to reach the project outcome (Brogan 2006). Because the project involves complex tasks, a range of inter-disciplinary skills is developed as distinct from focusing on one

aspect of knowledge or skill development – mathematics, for example (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx *et al.* 1991). The benefits for students are described as enhanced problem-solving skills, communication skills, team work skills and an understanding of the abstract or theoretical concepts behind the project issue including the way these are translated into action (Harriman 2003, Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial & Palincsar 1991, Brown & Campione 1994).

As competency standards are designed to be integrated into workplace tasks, projects that involve interdisciplinary ideas and actions represent the workplace more effectively than trying to isolate and then teach aspects of communication, group work and research for example. In Australia, PBL is a favoured teaching approach in some universities with a growing body of literature exploring the benefits and problems of this learning strategy. While the benefits include those listed above, problems include difficulty with assessment, team building and in the engineering sector, resource allocation (for example, Seidel & Godfrey 2005). The way these issues can be addressed is discussed at length by Seidel & Godfrey (2005) and is not the subject of this paper.

The PBL example in this paper was developed from the desire of VET teachers/trainers to maintain their industry skills, provide a service to agencies who frequently took students for practicums and because they were tired of the usual face-to-face teaching regardless of how many adult learning styles they addressed. Teaching a competency designed to develop research skills seemed pointless without doing some research that had value for the local community and relevance to the students involved.

The following sections of the paper outline the project *Snapshot of a generation* and discuss project-based learning to highlight the way theory and constructed knowledge inform each other with a number of benefits to education in the human services field.

The participation project

In 2006, a seven member student group aged from 19 years to 46 years were in the final year of the Diploma in Community Services Work through TAFENSW. They all lived in Orange, a regional town in central west New South Wales about three hours west of Sydney. They agreed to undertake a project commissioned by the local council community services division. The local council wanted to include children's views in their community planning process but found teenagers' views easier to access than younger children's. The project brief was to seek and record a group of children's views, present them to council in an appropriate format and evaluate the participation process with the children involved. The theory to be elaborated was (broadly) that participation in society is a basic human right and therefore everybody should be enabled to participate in public processes that concern them (UNICEF 1995).

The students began their project with an investigation of the way children are represented in society by collecting newspaper reports about children. Students also completed a content analysis of children's appearances in television programs. Students noted that pre-teenagers were most frequently depicted as cartoon characters (Bart Simpson and Eliza Thornberry, for example), as babies that did not speak or as recipients of education, health messages or consumer goods, and not as active participants in society.

As Levesque (1999) points out, childhood and adolescence are socially constructed stages that are highly idealised in western nations. Moving from childhood to adolescence in Australia is measured in age (turning thirteen) and in structured ritual (going to high school). Following the project group's discovery of the cartoon depictions of pre-teenagers, the acknowledgement that opinions of teenagers are more often sought than children's (Kang, Scharmann & Noh 2003) and that anecdotally there were social expectations from children and parents of the transition to high school, they determined that

eleven and twelve year olds were an appropriate target group for the participation project.

To give children a voice in community planning processes and in the community generally, the students decided to survey all the local children who were in their final year of primary school and report the results in the local newspaper, to the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People as well as to the local council for inclusion in the community plan.

Snapshot of a generation was a special feature published in an Australian regional daily newspaper in 1998. The feature reported survey findings on the community's attitudes and values about family, religion, politics, recreation, media and education. The original report's author could not be located and the newspaper had no copyright restrictions over the original survey nor any knowledge where it was derived from. The 2006 student group determined that the survey could meet their aim of giving children a voice in the community and the council's need to know about local children's views of the community. The students negotiated with their local newspaper's editor to publish the results.

The survey instrument consisted of several sections. It had 63 questions over five pages. The only demographic information collected was sex of respondent. The sections – school, family, sport and health, religion and society, and media and entertainment – included quantitative and qualitative questions within each section. For example, within the religion and society section, a question asked whether they went to church regularly. Respondents could tick 'yes' or 'no'. The following question asked what religion meant to them. Several lines were provided for the answer. The broad range of qualitative questions sought participants' views in their own words.

Method

The students planned and completed all the tasks required in this project. All principals were contacted by telephone, and then sent a letter with a copy of the new survey instrument and the 1998 *Snapshot of a generation* article. A follow-up phone call was made to find out if the school wished to participate. Participating students were year six children from local schools whose principals agreed to be involved in the project. Seven schools participated out of nine that had year six classes. Four participating schools were government funded and three were privately funded from student fees.

Participating schools were sent enough copies of the questionnaire for each child in year six classes, instructions for class teachers and arrangements were made for collection of completed questionnaires one week later. Instructions to teachers included that the survey was confidential and no names were required, that children should not discuss their answers with each other while completing the survey and that teachers should not make suggestions about what to write. Class teachers handed out and then collected the questionnaires. A total of 311 completed instruments were returned.

Project team members collated and reduced the data from the completed questionnaires. Each question was tallied separately and quantitative data were recorded on spreadsheets. Qualitative data were rewritten on separate sheets of paper and then collated into themes related to the section from which they originated. Care was taken to record participants' views in their own words. Each team member worked on several questions within a section, recording the responses, reducing the data into themes and writing up the findings for that question. Each team member consulted with others to ensure the validity of their analysis. Results were grouped by sex of participant. Where possible, results from the current survey were compared with the 1998 newspaper report. The discussion points of the final report and related recommendations were developed from

a team evaluation of the results, incorporating issues raised in the literature review and issues noted and discussed during the data analysis phase.

Follow-up

The completed report was sent to the newspaper editor. Stories from the report were published every day for six days. The final report was sent to the local council for inclusion in the community plan and also to the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People for inclusion in her library.

To evaluate the implementation of participation theory, students needed to know if the children participating in the survey perceived they had been involved with and visible to the adult community. To develop other research method experience, the students decided to hold focus groups.

Three months after the newspaper publications, two focus groups of survey respondents were convened to find out the children's views about the project. Two schools were contacted and agreed to select six children from those who volunteered to participate in a group discussion about the survey and the newspaper articles. A focus group was held at each school with six children. The discussion lasted forty minutes and children were asked what they remembered about the survey, if they had seen the newspaper articles and what they thought about the project including the newspaper stories, the local council community plan and the NSW Commission for Children and Young People.

The focus groups were convened in the school halls. Children were shown a blank copy of the survey, informed about the focus group process and asked if they had any questions. They were informed that the discussion had nothing to do with their school results and that they could stop participating at any time. The following

discussions were recorded by two project team members who scribed onto large sheets of paper. At the end of discussion on each of the three questions, the scribes held up their notes and read them back to the group. Group participants were asked if they agreed with the notes and if they would like to change or add anything to what was recorded.

The focus groups found that children remembered doing the survey but did not recall much about the questions. The questions that most interested them and that both groups reported talking about in the playground later were about what they would do when they were adults, both personally in their family life and for a career. Comments made about the survey included:

It was a bit dull.

It took too long to do.

We talked about it after, about what we'd do when we grew up and stuff.

All of the children in the focus groups had seen the newspaper articles. Teachers had brought copies of the paper to school and children reported their parents buying the paper when they usually did not. The children were excited about their views being in the paper and reported talking about the articles with their parents and with friends at school.

My mum and dad asked about the bullying and if I was scared of getting kidnapped or robbed.

We brought the paper to school and everyone tried to work out if what they said was in there.

The focus group participants described feeling that they were important and that their opinions were important when they were in the paper. When told that the report would be seen by other people who made decisions in local and state government, the children said it was good if politicians listened to them. Children's statements included:

I hope we get a new swimming pool.

They might ask us about other stuff.

The students described the focus groups as a vital stage in the connection of theory and practice because they provided feedback about turning the ideals of the project into action. The students were able to reflect on what had worked towards their goal of participation for children and what was more important for all the adults involved. For the students, finishing the project and their course was frequently the main goal. For the project commissioners, it was important they could incorporate views from a target group specified in the NSW Local Government Act for local government plans.

Discussion of project outcomes

The competencies from the Community Services Training Package (CHCo2) that were achieved by the students during this project included: *Undertake research activities, Develop and implement a community development strategy, Develop, implement and promote effective communication techniques* and *Reflect and improve upon professional practice*. The student group devised the methodology, managed the project, conducted and evaluated the research, wrote the report and disseminated the findings. The teacher/trainer's role was to present theoretical concepts at relevant stages (ethical issues of research with children, for example), and facilitate reflection on the process and knowledge developed, managing conflict along the way.

The students were totally engaged and enthralled by the research and learning process during *Snapshot of a generation*. They became very protective of the findings and committed to the goal of publishing children's voices in an accessible manner. The project had multiple tasks related to research, networking, group work, communication with children and adults, professional confidence and conduct, planning, record keeping and participating in local government processes as part of promoting the participation of children.

Team members had to contact community leaders such as school principals and the newspaper editor, explain their project and promote the benefits of involvement in it. They had to produce high quality documents for publication to a diverse audience and they had to communicate appropriately and effectively with children. Working together, planning and problem-solving were daily tasks vital to meeting project deadlines.

The project process had to include ways of consolidating knowledge. It was important to the teacher/trainer that team members reflected on why they undertook certain courses of action, referred back to the participative theory underpinning the project and reflected on what they would do differently next time. Once the project had been decided on and a timeline established for completion, some aspects of teaching follow easily. In research, the development of a proposal including methodology lends itself to outlining the theory, discussing the way it relates to the project, developing a plan and implementing it. Evaluation of the plan and its implementation are vital to reflect on the process and learn from it for the next stage or the next project.

Evaluation and reflection strategies during *Snapshot* included morning meetings where the project tasks were identified for the day and recorded in a minutes book. The book was reviewed weekly before progress meetings with members of the local council community services team who provided feedback to the students about the project and asked them to reflect on their week's work including what they had learnt. This enabled the teacher/facilitator to highlight aspects of the project that related to competency elements or generate activities and tasks around elements that were overlooked.

At times of conflict in the group, a meeting would be held, the issue/s discussed and a decision made by the students about what action would be taken. This was also recorded in the minutes book which became an important record of the project and also a tool

for assessment. This record-keeping process embeds evaluation of teaching and learning strategies in the project and continues the teacher/facilitator's learning alongside students.

Discussion of project-based learning as a participatory process

Project-based learning subverts the process of typical human services practicum experiences where students develop skills in the workplace because the project comes into the classroom to be completed by the group with peer support and facilitated by the teacher/trainer. However, the project is not a simulation and the outcome is a product of some sort that is important for the particular aspect of human service delivery. Workplace employees who commission the project and determine its parameters become mentors and advisers to the project team. The stages of the project are linked to theory along the way via formal teaching strategies and group processes such as discussion and reflection.

The challenge for teacher/facilitators of project-based learning is to link the project with the curriculum and more importantly to find ways to link learning with the experience of doing. Linking theory and practice has long been the challenge for educators (for example, Healy 2005). In the VET sector, competency-based learning has clearly, and some would argue narrowly, defined skills related to tasks (for example, Jennings 1991, Ling 1999). For educators in this sector, ways of making particular skills meaningful and demonstrating their usefulness remain linked to the theory underpinning the doing, regardless of the performance emphasis of the competency framework. For example, in *Snapshot* it was vital to begin with conceptual understandings of participation and the social construction of childhood to inform the way the project would develop. Without this grounding the students may not have made such a strong commitment to promoting children's voices. It is the

conceptual grounding that gives meaning to the related skills and tasks.

Citizen participation is frequently promoted as a goal of governance or government processes. Consumers, service users and community members are invited to participate in policy development and service delivery, particularly in the health and welfare sector. Educators in this sector train students in participatory strategies such as needs analysis and asset-based community development so future human service workers can use participatory processes in their work. Participation (also called community engagement) is a goal many universities have to enhance their relevance to their local communities (Egan 2005).

Translating participatory ideals into practice has proven difficult for many reasons (Wyse 2001). However, in a sector where empowerment and social justice are the key principles guiding practice (AASW 2006) and a history of 'grassroots' responses to social issues is upheld as an appropriate way of being effective, the positive premise of participation is assumed. The *Snapshot* project had ideals of participation at several levels – community and student group – with participants engaged in both levels simultaneously. It also had ideals of imparting human services practice skills in the safe and usually simulated theoretical environment of the classroom.

PBL challenges the tension between formal theoretical knowledge and constructed practice knowledge that plays out in attempts to turn ideals into practice. A post-modern view of this tension reveals a contested site that is shaped around the academically constructed dualism of theory/practice. The dualism hides the way people learn, who learns and what knowledge is developed.

Some kind of participation is inherent in the teaching/learning relationship and this is enhanced by project-based learning because the process is fluid, unpredictable and relies on mutual respect

and trust. Teacher/trainers have to trust that the students will engage in the process and that they can work out what has to be done and by when. Students have to trust that teacher/trainers will provide them with the information they need in a timely fashion and guide the process so links can be made between tasks and knowledge.

It can be argued that most education is undertaken to get a new job or a different job. Education is inextricably linked to doing work because it suggests why tasks or projects should be done in certain ways. It is inherently practical regardless of whether it is delivered in universities, TAFE institutions or schools. The theory/practice, formal knowledge/constructed knowledge and teacher/student dualisms can prevent educators and students taking up the possibilities of participating in constructing knowledge. Project-based learning opens up these possibilities.

Postscript

When the conference flyer came out for *United we stand* (see Allan 2006) – a combined conference of social work, welfare and community practitioners and educators – an abstract about *Snapshot* was written and accepted and the project team swung into action. They got a letter of support for their work from the local mayor, wrote letters and made phone calls requesting donations, held barbecues and chocolate drives and raised enough money for their conference registrations and airfares. The students wrote the paper about their project and, although extremely nervous about the forum and their abilities, successfully presented their work. The feedback was positive. They met a lot of people and learnt a great deal from other presentations and from doing their own. The students' goal of promoting children's participation had the unforeseen outcome of promoting their own participation in public processes concerned with education and service delivery in the field in which they were training.

I wanted them to write this paper but they got jobs instead.

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