

Taking risks—experiential learning and the writing student

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The role of a professional and creative writing degree is to provide resources, structured workshops, professional interactions—and the potential for creative risk. Opportunities for risk, within the structured environment of the university, challenge the individual's perspectives and judgements, as well as their ability to analyse and to reflect on their writing and creative practices.

From this starting point the authors, both writing industry practitioners and academics, have developed experiential projects with the aim of transforming their teaching practice from a model of narrative hierarchies of knowledge to learning through performativity, social connectedness and immersive workplace learning.

As the case studies illustrate, this transitional approach has enabled our millennial learners more confidently to take risks, accept challenges and transform their understanding of their own knowledge, skills and identities.

Introduction

There is nothing new about internships and experiential learning. According to Stanton (1995), work placement is a form of learning as old as our civilisation, with mediaeval craft guilds teaching learning-by-doing, for example, or orally-based societies informally passing on wisdom, skills and cultural lore as learning. With the advent of the university, distinctions have emerged between learning and doing, between scholarship and work.

Universities are now required to work with a postmodern construct of knowledge, which according to Raschke (2003) focuses on 'performativity' rather than 'narrative' hierarchies of knowledge. Universities are potentially transforming the stock or store of knowledge (the narrative of information passed on to successive generations) into knowledge operations. Within the 'narrative hierarchies of knowledge' paradigm, there is a perceived concern (expressed by Crebert *et al.* 2004, Commonwealth of Australia 2002, and Lyotard in Raschke 2003: 77–78) that the performative approaches may lead to a checklist of vocational skills, to operational competencies rather than to deeper learning.

There is a risk, too, in working with the twenty-first century learner, the millennial learner born after 1980, within a more traditional hierarchy of narrative learning. These learners see themselves as part of a social collective of learning, prepared to create knowledge from myriad sources. They see experience as more important in a learning sense than the acquisition of information.

As industry practitioners and academics, we have attempted to respond to and use such changes in the university and in learners, to construct internship units that ameliorate negative inherent systemic risks and to encourage risk-taking by our writing students that will foster confidence in their abilities towards participation in

the creative industries within organisations and as sole practitioners, using traditional as well as new media.

Thus the two case studies described below demonstrate the need for students to build on their theoretical knowledge, adding their experience of workplace skills, and to reflect on the transition of their knowledge and skills into workplace contexts. For this purpose, Case study 1 uses an interactive reflective e-journal during the internship, plus an oral presentation to a panel of peers and markers, at the conclusion of the placement, in which students describe and evaluate their learning experiences. Case study 2 uses a major group oral presentation as well as an individual report to the leader/mentor of the unit for the work project. Through establishing such mechanisms for reflection, we endeavour to engage with the students' experiences. For, as noted by Boud *et al.* (in Smith, Clebb, Lawrence & Todd 2007):

Learning builds on and flows from experience: no matter what external prompts to learning there might be—teachers, materials, interesting opportunities—learning can only occur if the experience of the learner is engaged (p. 132).

Transformative learning within the context of internships and work projects occurs when learners reflect deeply (Beach 1999, Smith *et al.* 2007). Our students are encouraged to use their journalling and oral presentations to analyse how they solved problems related to the tasks undertaken, and how they were able to view this new knowledge. Thus, they elicit a greater awareness of themselves as developing new and exciting identities during the process, and perceive their own personal abilities in the context of the theory, which allows them to understand their knowledge as generalised into other situations.

Our study designs for our experiential courses require students to incorporate ongoing reflection within the student journal and evaluative post-program reporting. They also encourage the sharing

of experiences, so that students do not need to recapitulate the entire process—they learn from others and build on the contextual understandings to increase their capacity to ‘produce culture as well as reproduce it’ (Beach 1999: 133). We have been influenced in our approach by experiential learning theorists who link habituated reflective practice with the move from surface to deeper approaches to student learning, and transformative learning which promotes a student ‘learning to negotiate his or her own *values*, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others’ (Mezirow 1997: 11).

The internship program in Professional and Creative Writing at undergraduate level, as well as in the postgraduate Creative Arts, is working with the transforming power of experiential learning. The students apply the idea of entrepreneurship associated with the freelance artist, writer or editor to the process of job-hunting, and most importantly to the research required to engage themselves emotionally and intellectually with their targeted industry sector. They see the relevance of the skills, they apply the theory and they learn more deeply—the information transforms into a knowledge base they take with them to other organisations, and to their own creative practices.

Context

We teach during a time of increasing massification of education, and the attendant ‘corporatisation’ of the university sector (Biggs 2002, Coté *et al.* 2007, Sanderson & Watters 2006), when ‘knowledge [is] treated as a marketable commodity’ (Biggs 2002: 185) and ‘vocational courses, the demand and staffing for which are market driven, are displacing fundamental disciplines’ (Biggs 2002: 195). This, too, is not new information, but increasingly it contextualises the reality of teaching in the tertiary institution and, in particular for us, the teaching of creative and professional writing within a university

context. Within this milieu, our students do not necessarily embrace the idea of scholarship, nor being a writer as their primary identity. Their goals are diverse, strongly influenced by the social context of their time, and are thus different from those of previous generations (Wyn & Dwyer 2000). Some of our students work full-time while completing their degree, most work at least part-time. Many see their degree as a ticket to a job, as distinct, perhaps, from our idealistic vision of a passion for writing driven by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge and understanding within which to contextualise our words. Increasingly, we come under pressure, from students and the university administration alike, to measure teaching successes through destination surveys that confirm the employability of our students.

One response to these pressures has been to import some aspects of the TAFE sector into the university curriculum without sufficient consideration about how this kind of practical education will enhance the university learning experience: the incidental focus on a particular software package that enables typesetting skills, for instance, as opposed to the higher level skills of critical thinking that would enable an editor to critique page layout. Such decisions often follow management demands for ‘experiential learning’ within the curriculum. Wagner, Childs and Houlbrook (2001) warn against the implementation of superficial strategies in response to the education crisis, highlighting the fallacy of succumbing to ‘utilitarian demands’ which seek certain kinds of work outcomes without sufficient thought about how such interventions actually fit into a learning paradigm and a pedagogy.

Where earlier generations used education, and in particular tertiary education, to change their future, today such potential for change is not so apparent to our students. Today’s students do not perceive clear choices, nor models for change. In introducing our internship programs in writing, publishing, editing and creative enterprise

at Deakin University, we endeavoured to widen the educational options of our students by providing ‘real world’ experiences without abrogating our responsibilities as educators to implement a transitional or transformational approach that includes ‘critical and interpretive knowledge’ as well as ‘technical and instrumental outcomes’ (from Habermas in Wagner *et al.* 2001: 315).

Higher education in the learning society, a report (Dearing 1997) on the future of the higher education sector in the United Kingdom, foreshadows the creation of a society committed to learning throughout life. This report predicates a culture of disciplined thinking, which would encourage curiosity, challenge existing ideas and generate new ones, as a key area to target for the future. Dearing envisages the learning society as one that enables individuals to reach their highest potential, allowing them to grow intellectually, become well equipped for work, make a contribution to society and achieve personal fulfilment.

In Australia, the *Employability skills for the future* report (Commonwealth of Australia 2002) takes a strongly vocational and employer/enterprise-based approach, indicating the need for ‘a more highly skilled workforce where the generic and transferable skills are broadly distributed across the organisation [and] the ongoing employability of individuals [requires them to have] a set of relevant skills, as well as a capacity to learn how to learn new things’ (p. 1). The report contextualises skills within an ‘employability’ framework that reveals a new focus on personal attributes such as ‘loyalty, commitment, honesty and integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, commonsense, positive self-esteem, sense of humour, balanced attitude to work and home life, ability to deal with pressure, motivation, and adaptability’ (2002: 8), articulating a work-in-progress for lifelong learning. The experiential learning projects described below have led to positive student reflection on the links between personal attributes and employability. The projects

also explore whether those skills are best absorbed from focused learning in writing, publishing and creative enterprise, or are more meaningfully translated through industry contexts.

Approaches to teaching that encourage deep learning within a workplace situation

According to Oblinger (2008), today's learners are connected and experiential. She suggests a breadth of access to social networks: MySpace (3rd most popular site in the United States), Facebook (85 per cent market share among fourth year university students in the United States) and Flickr (46 million visitors per month as of April 2008). Such sites not only provide a social network but also a potential immersive learning environment. This is a participatory culture, with a sense of collective intelligence—everyone has something to contribute. Knowledge is created not possessed, and it is possible to use a community rather than an individual to gain knowledge. The millennial or net generation learner sees experiences as more important than the acquisition of information.

Action learning, which works through group tasks and problem-solving methodologies, provides opportunities to develop strategies and take action, then capture what has been learned in a dynamic and collaborative way (Marquardt 2007). Today's learner comes from a connected generation which constructs knowledge in a nonlinear way, starting from the known or concrete, then moving informally through more lateral, mosaic-style developments. A virtual world or contextual learning space developed using the principles of connectivity and experiential learning can provide socialisation, exploration and conversations that reflect on the learning. It is reflection on that connectivity, in non-linear ways, which leads to effective experiential learning. As Kolb (1983) has stated in *Experiential learning*, 'Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (p. 41).

According to Silberman (2007), experiential learning incorporates a direct involvement at emotional and intellectual levels, using projects or work-based activities that are very similar to or replicate workplace experiences. This transformative experience potentially requires immersive and imaginative simulations and situations to bring the learning closer to the day-to-day workplace experiences, particularly in aspects such as interpersonal skills and communications. These are culturally productive experiences which are spontaneously absorbed rather than intentionally generalised from a specific skill set or previous problem-solving exercises.

Dede (2005) describes immersion as participating in a comprehensive and realistic experience. This situated learning incorporates a transition of knowledge from one situation to another, leading to improved performance in a real-world setting. Immersion incorporates mediation (an expert guide) to develop reflection, and to identify the importance of transfer. Thus, the case studies that follow explore both the transformation or translation through experiences, and the reflection that has ensured that the learning is deep, engaged and relevant to the individual.

Work-based learning (WBL)

Trigwell and Reid (1998) provide a description of work-based learning as:

... a range of educational practices which involves students learning in authentic work settings. The curriculum is significantly influenced by issues and challenges which emerge from the exigencies of work rather than predetermined academic content driven requirements (1998: 142).

The work-based activities undertaken by students are neither 'neutral' nor 'simply additive' to the student experience (Beach 1999: 124). Beach uses the idea of consequential transition, which more accurately focuses on a transformation of the learner due to

‘conscious reflective struggle to reconstruct knowledge, skills and identity in ways that are consequential to the individual becoming someone or something new, and in ways that contribute to the creation and metamorphosis of social activity and, ultimately, society’ (1999: 130). Thus the eventual outcome may change the learner’s sense of self, arising from a transition in the learning process which has consequences for both the learner and the particular organisation. This relationship is illustrated by an intern who had undertaken an editorial role with a magazine being encouraged to take responsibility for developing and writing key stories, which in turn expanded the audience for that magazine. The intern reflected on the experience as being life-changing, transforming her goals towards the practice of the freelance writer.

Tennant (quoted in Crebert *et al.* 2004: 161) usefully formulates a number of principles which, we argue, encourage transformative learning:

- learners are exposed to ‘authentic’ activities, with the opportunity to access the full range of learning resources
- learners are exposed to multiple situations and multiple examples
- attention is drawn to the potential for transfer by highlighting the generic nature of the skill being acquired
- the higher-order skills and principles being acquired are identified and made explicit
- a supportive climate exists in the transfer context (e.g. supervisor support, opportunity to use learning, peer support, supervisor sanctions, positive personal outcomes, encouragement of further learning)
- there is a capacity to ‘learn how to learn from experience’, that is, practice in analysing experience and developing strategies for learning

- there exists a community of discourse (i.e. a common way of talking) in which all members are actively engaged in learning through communicating
- learners have 'lifelong learning' skills and dispositions (the capacity to be self-directed and control and regulate one's own learning).

These principles have formed the basis of the development and review of our internships at undergraduate and postgraduate level, as well as the workplace-based projects focused on experiential learning.

Atkins (in Crebert *et al.* 2004: 150) suggests research has identified that 'graduates in the [twenty-first] century are likely to be knowledge workers and symbolic analysts, service providers, members of learning organisations, and managers of their own careers'. The ability to be adaptable, and able to change with the requirements of their careers, is therefore an important graduate attribute for the millennial learner. It is, of course, blended with other attributes as indicated by statements such as the following taken from the Deakin University 2010 Handbook:

All Deakin University programs will encourage students to develop attitudes of intellectual curiosity and motivation for independent thinking, autonomous learning and reflective professional and personal practice, and a commitment to ethical and sustainable practices. Appropriate to its level of study and discipline composition, each program will be designed to ensure that students develop their knowledge and understanding as well as a range of generic skills (Deakin University 2010).

The link with Dearing's (1997) vision of curiosity that challenges ideas and generates new ones within a learning society is inherent in the above statement, and is accepted as a valid outcome for a university graduate.

Work-based learning is an important tool for obtaining the transfer of high-level skills and knowledge to practical applications. Wagner

et al. (2001) introduce the idea of work-based learning by borrowing critical social pedagogy from the social sciences and using it as a framework that:

[positions] WBL not only as an educational technology and method but as a site of struggle, a contested social practice, between contradictory economic, social and political interests and differing views on the role of learning and education in contemporary society (p. 321).

Wagner *et al.* also acknowledge historical difficulties with the theoretical constructs of work-based learning, wherein WBL has been construed as ‘purely instrumental and ... selling the role of education short’ by merely pandering to the demands of industry for a ‘technically skilled’ workforce (2001: 316–318). They are comfortable, however, to support WBL as an appropriate model for experiential learning, arguing strongly that ‘economic viability and quality education are not mutually exclusive’ and that ‘both outcomes form an integral part of a WBL dialectic’ (2001: 316). Wagner *et al.* favour a cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary definition of learning, which allows them to theorise ways in which ‘disciplinary knowledge can enrich learning and diversify action possibilities’ allowing for ‘the development of skills and knowledge that is at once technical, interpretative and critical’ (2001: 324).

Although these educational researchers frame their teaching within ‘the relationship between education and the economy’, ‘theory and practice in education processes’, and the ‘dualism of education and training and associated social and institutional divisions’ (2001: 316), these three concerns are equally valid when considering the placement of creative writing, editing and enterprise students within the creative industries workplace, as will be demonstrated in the following case studies.

In a development of Biggs’s concept of ‘constructive alignment’, Walsh (2007) provides encouragement and modelling for our

internship and experiential project experiments. Removing the idea of 'constructive alignment' from the formal learning environment of the university for which it was developed, Walsh suggests that it is Biggs's focus on the connection between active student behaviour and deep learning which makes it a useful framework within which to consider WBL. 'In order to develop professional skills in students and to create functioning knowledge,' Walsh (2007) suggests,

Biggs postulates that it is necessary for them to have declarative knowledge (the relevant knowledge base), procedural knowledge (the skills necessary to apply this) and conditional knowledge (an awareness of appropriate circumstances in which to apply the rest). He argues that, traditionally, universities have taught much declarative knowledge and some procedural knowledge, but that the students have had to develop the conditional knowledge which is necessary to achieve fully functioning knowledge on their own after graduation (p. 81).

The workplace, where students actively engage in the pursuits of a professional worker, and where they 'predict, diagnose, explain and problem solve', is likely to be more active than the classroom (Biggs in Walsh 2007: 82). Such approaches would encourage an improvement in the student's motivation for success and the degree of confidence with which students approach their work-based tasks and, Walsh predicts, close the knowledge gap prior to graduation.

Employing strategies of reflective practice

Reflective practice is part of the creative skill set of an adaptable new learner. Using Mestre's (2002) concept (from Smith *et al.* 2007: 132) in which knowledge learned in one situation is translated into a new context as a definition of the transfer of learning (in a transformative sense), Smith *et al.* (2007) champion reflection that links theoretical construct to practice as a vehicle for establishing a model for student learning during work-based experience. 'The pedagogical benefits of work-based experiences', they suggest, 'depend largely on the extent

to which students reflect on them and the extent to which they take understandings derived from an academic context and relate these to work' (Smith *et al.* 2007: 132).

An imperative of the study design of experiential learning units, then, is to establish avenues of reflective practice in which students contribute to making explicit their otherwise tacit skills and knowledge acquired in a workplace. Such reflective practice, essential both during and after the work-based experience (Beard & Wilson in Smith *et al.* 2007: 133), encourages students not only to make 'sense of the experience while it is happening', but to consider and analyse that experience leading to the production of 'personal theories'. Such 'dual reflection encourages deep learning' (Smith *et al.* 2007: 133) and, we suggest, the formation of new identities (from Beard 1999).

The challenges of introducing reflective practice into experiential learning and achieving the goal of deep learning are multifaceted. Smith *et al.* warn that for some students the exercise of reflection risks becoming merely a 'skills audit' (2007: 139), useful for a student's *curriculum vitae* perhaps, but inadequate to the task of transformative learning. In constructing our own experiential learning programs, presented in the case studies that follow, we have endeavoured to establish a reflective practice that encourages deep learning.

Case study 1: Undergraduate experiential learning during industry work placements

In 2007, the Professional and Creative Writing discipline at Deakin University introduced an undergraduate internship program. After prerequisite studies, students are placed with an industry employer for a total of 100 hours' work experience. They are required to research and negotiate their own work placement as well as the particular tasks or project to be undertaken under the guidance of the prospective employer. Concurrent with the on-the-job training,

students complete a series of assessment tasks (written and oral) for credit towards their degree under the auspices of an academic supervisor. The internships were introduced partly in response to student lobbying, but most importantly for us as educators, as a result of our own industry experience that confirmed the significance of networking as a successful strategy in gaining employment and career satisfaction. Internships have also assisted, as revealed by our students' experiences, the university's compliance with prescribed measures of success including a Graduate Destination survey that measures 'success' according to the employment outcomes of graduating students.

In addition to completing the 100 hours' work experience with an industry employer, students undertake research (documentary and interview) into their chosen industry and host organisation (employer), producing a written report that demonstrates their understanding of the organisation (which may be as small as an individual operator) within its industry context. This initial research, we believe, prepares and encourages our students to engage with a multidisciplinary approach encompassing the theoretical, economic and social frameworks as envisioned by Wagner *et al.* (2001: 316). The students are also required to correspond regularly with their academic supervisor during the work placement through the medium of an online journal accessed by both parties via the university's Blackboard/Vista learning system. This not only fulfils the university's duty of care to students absent from campus, but allows the academic supervisor to respond to students' queries, to provide encouragement, to celebrate successes, to impart specific industry knowledge and to guide the student towards problem-solving strategies, thus enabling the role of the mentor or expert guide (Dede 2005, Walsh 2007). The journal also provides a collection point for student reflection that will inform the second assessment task: the production of a reflective essay on the student's internship—also presented in oral format to their peer group for assessment by our teaching panel.

The undergraduate internship unit has been running for four semesters. Of the 26 third-year students who have completed the placement, eight have secured employment with their host organisation or have found a position with a similar organisation upon graduation. One decided that the chosen industry sector was not for her, and returned to university with the intention of pursuing a career in teaching. One student left the program midway through the internship for personal reasons. While these figures demonstrate the 'employability' (Commonwealth of Australia 2002) of our interns and feed the university's need for successful outcomes, for us, it is seeing our students' developing confidence, initially displayed in their journal and later during the oral presentation, which confirms the link between the theory and our practice.

Through their workplace experience, the undertaking and completion of tasks, students construct their own learning and meaning (Walsh 2007: 80). In the process of making their employment experience explicit through regular reflection enshrined in the act of journalling, students are enabled to make sense of and record what they have learned, thus moving towards deep learning (Smith *et al.* 2007). We make links between learning, reflective journalling while in the workplace and the final assignment (written and oral) that concretises students' understanding of their knowledge and skills acquisition. Through the internship experience the students see themselves differently within the wider world. The confidence instilled by this change in perception allows them to take risks with their future work situation, allowing them, for instance, the ability to move freely between the organisation and freelance work. It is with a particular pleasure that we find, in their journals and final assignment task, our students making links between their academic study, the host mentorship and the work undertaken during the work placement.

Case study 2: Postgraduate experiential learning—building creative teams and *Exposure*

This case study involves a postgraduate coursework unit, with a group comprising 15 to 30 international and local students (depending on demand and interest each year) working in teams constructed for the 13-week unit. The work-based project of supporting Deakin University's arts showcase season *Exposure* has been the driver of the experiential learning approach since 2006. The unit provides a workplace-oriented context, incorporating the mythical Gibbering Communications Agency, which is responsible for pitching ideas to the client (the coordinator of the *Exposure* season) regarding the promotion and launch of the program. The project teams are established using the following learning styles and project management tools/questionnaires.

- Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire: this questionnaire indicates four learning approaches within which learners (and in this case, team members) operate comfortably—activist, reflector, pragmatist and theorist (see <http://www.peterhoney.com> for details on the LSQ and interpretations of individual types).
- Belbin Self-Perception Inventory: this questionnaire identifies nine roles and describes how each contributes to a team. Most people operate within three to four team roles, and these can be adapted depending on the situation. (Check the website, <http://www.belbin.com>, for details on the nine team roles.)

These tools (and a skills audit administered by Sheila Gibbering a.k.a. the mediator/lecturer/project manager in charge of this experiential learning project) provide a basis for establishing the teams. This results in teams with a mix of learning styles, and a mix of team roles such as shaper, team-worker and so on.

Members of the 2008 Gibbering Communications Agency project team ranged in age from 22 to 28 years old, and were comfortable in their new media literacy in technology communication tools. The team members came from countries including Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Norway, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Uzbekistan, bringing with them a variety of learning approaches. The students expected to develop skills in working in the proposed teams that would allow them to negotiate with a creative community of performing arts students and staff. A successful end outcome was clearly stipulated for each team including the launch, production of an e-newsletter and promotional website, and the creation of an archive produced as a short film capturing the workplace project. The students were studying in the framework of the Master of Communication, a program which allows a broad selection of studies (and therefore an eclectic mix of skills) within streams—public relations, advertising, journalism, film/video/photography, and professional and creative writing.

The teams were deliberately set up to include a mix of skills and backgrounds, learning styles and management or leadership qualities, including quite divergent English language skills. In fact, the teams—which were guaranteed to have friction to test the students' abilities to work together—had a very strong risk of failure. The project depended on and explored:

- the use of different media as the communication 'glue'—initially the Deakin Studies Online platform (using the Blackboard/Vista learning system), eventually the wireless, portable and speedy response media alternatives to which the students turned (mobile phone, text messaging, email)
- the use of an experienced educator/project manager/mentor as the risk mediator—a simulation of the work environment of a project or consultancy agency

- experiential contexts—the live work project and its pressure to commit to the outcomes
- the interpersonal skills which allowed team members to negotiate and problem solve, then reflect and analyse performance and learned skills via major group presentations to the Gibbering Communications Agency and the client
- the mobile technology and the way the millennial learners used it, as opposed to the baby boomers who were designing the program.

These media technologies and experiential contexts became the tools of the students' learning, rather than (or more accurately in addition to) the educational 'expert' or authority.

Outcomes

Each of the teams was fluid and self-directed, moving between multiple media, and focused on what they could achieve with the alternatives. During their oral review reports on completion, the students reflected rigorously on the powerful learning achieved by the blending of face-to-face and media-related communications in emergency situations.

Although many team members had come from traditional teacher-directed learning models, they adapted almost instantly to the collective sharing of experiences to pool their information. Whether in skills- or knowledge-based learning areas, they were comfortable using the team as a learning tool. The lecturer/project manager was the 'boss' of the agency, not the learning authority (although there was risk minimisation in the lecturer also taking on the role of the mentor and mediating the immersion in the project).

The print materials (useful readings, web links and resources, learning activities) were utilised by the students in exactly the same way as the learning from the team—as one of the sources when events

became difficult and required strategies, rather than as preparation for a task.

The sense of excitement at working with a live project lasted the length of the *Exposure* launch and its promotion, despite mixed success in achieving the outcomes. The excitement was leavened with realistic reflection. In a classic action learning approach, the teams learned immersively about group dynamics, and team learning models incorporated assessments that were a part of the project outcomes rather than an adjunct tool. Team presentations were captured in a range of media, including written reports and e-portfolios, action plans and scheduling tools, and websites.

There were regular opportunities for reflection, both in individual surveys and in public team and individual presentations. A comparison with the scenario-based team presentations used in this unit in previous years indicates a greatly increased applied learning of the key interpersonal skills; for example, problem solving, negotiating, and mediating between different skill sets. The planning and team-management strategies were also used on a needs basis with the live work project, so discussion of their validity was infused with applied knowledge and enriched reflection on the situated learning.

Comments and presentations from students have indicated that their learning was exponentially rapid and applied. The action learning approach, which enabled reflection during the project, resulted in amendments to achieve better outcomes. The combination of outcomes-based learning and reflection/communication through a range of social technologies demonstrated the students' satisfaction with the transformation of theory into applied knowledge.

Experiential learning and the education versus training dichotomy

In moving from the world of the university to the world of work, our students do not merely take a bundle of skills learned in one institution and repurpose these for use in another. Beach sees students in such situations as in transition, which ‘potentially involves the construction of knowledge, identities and skills, or transformation, rather than the application of something that has been acquired elsewhere’ (Beach 1999: 119).

Transformation in learning is also potentially about transforming the learning space, or the knowledge space as an academic framework. Raschke (2003) writes of the postmodern university, or hyperuniversity, in the postmodern age. The fluid definitions of personal identity, nationhood, culture and knowledge are challenging the non-fluid models of instruction and enquiry, which are potentially mediaeval rather than modern, that is, prior to postmodern. The knowledge space of the university provided a received learning rather than one that was initiated from learner needs. Rache anticipates a stressful transformation that involves moving the current learning space from a history of hierarchy. Lyotard (cited in Raschke 2003: 77) understands postmodern knowledge as encompassing ‘competency’ or ‘performativity’, as opposed to ‘narrative’. Narrativity has been the model that has thinkers and practitioners providing iterations of knowledge for successive generations. The university, utilising the ‘performance’ indicators, needs to work from the functioning of the knowledge operations rather than a stock of knowledge itself. Thus there is an emphasis on graduate attributes that encompass this sense of performance, or outcomes. Lyotard argues that, in the postmodern learning society, students (‘young people’) will not acquire a package of knowledge as a prelude to entering the workforce; instead, knowledge will be:

... served ‘à la carte’ to adults who are either working or expect to be, for the purpose of improving their skills and chances

of promotion, but also to help them acquire information, languages, and language games allowing them both to widen their occupational horizons and to articulate their technical and ethical experience (Lyotard, cited in Raschke 2003: 77).

Within the context of the new learner and the postmodern university, it is interesting to note that a number of our students come to the BA (Professional and Creative Writing) having completed a writing and editing diploma at a TAFE college. A brief survey of such students provides a perspective on the university's learning space and educational role. The TAFE course, they suggest, is stronger on the mechanics: learning the rules of grammar and usage, and the practice of writing techniques. The degree offers opportunities to learn about theory, and the importance of research in a writing career. It encourages students to undertake majors in the more traditional academic disciplines alongside their writing degree. Many students move from TAFE to university for career change, some having spent time 'shopping' through other degree courses: the credit against their TAFE studies allows them to achieve a quicker (and thus cheaper) degree. Most are career orientated. The TAFE cohort expresses surprise about the lack of maturity exhibited by students in the university sector, missing the typical mature-age confidence that has allowed meaningful interactions during discussion and workshops in the TAFE classroom. They are disappointed, too, with what they describe as a lack of community feeling on the university campus. This group sees evening classes, which allow students to work during the day and study part-time at night, as an advantage of TAFE.

Rather than merely pointing to differences between two learning spaces—TAFE versus university/training versus education—it is interesting to note how neatly the perceptions of these students match Lyotard's predictions of the postmodern search for knowledge, and the widening of occupational horizons (cited in Raschke 2003: 77–78). These students are relatively self-directed learners who are engaged imaginatively with problem solving and seek authentic

learning situations. They are excited by the prospect of adding theoretical studies to their practical knowledge. They participate in extracurricular events and are strong collaborators. The new learner's needs are not narrative, but require a context that provides an imaginative community of learning.

Conclusion

The risks for tutors and mentors have been carefully calculated: the performative set of graduate attributes across universities is taking many paces towards acknowledgement of the policy directions of the learning society of the twenty-first century. The immersive workplace-based experiences outlined in the case studies provide millennial learners with opportunities for the transformation of theory into applied situations. Whether working as individuals within an organisation, as freelance contractors or as part of a creative team, students demonstrate an ability to adjust their perceptions and praxis around the projects in which they become involved. This is achieved through the immersive nature of the projects, the availability of the tools for the twenty-first century learner, our 'inbuilt' requirement for conscious reflection during and after completion of the work experience, and the facilitation provided by the ('expert guide') mediator.

Three major aspects of risk are investigated through these case studies. The first is that the placement or project will not engage the student in the learning experience. The strategy to minimise this risk involves experienced mediators, clear industry briefings and open channels of communication. The second risk, that immersive learning is potentially in tension with the traditional higher education paradigm, is ameliorated by the blending of academic and industry practitioner expertise. The ultimate concern is that deeper learning would not be achieved when the immersive project did not fulfil its projected outcomes. However, reflection directed through the

assessment strategies has resulted in developing a transformational learning space for our millennial learners.

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