Chapter 8

Developing a Transdisciplinary Work–Based Learning Curriculum: A Model for Recognising Learning from Work

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ABSTRACT

Middlesex University’s transdisciplinary work-based learning curriculum framework is presented as a coherent and innovative means to provide flexible and open learning opportunities for those in work. The chapter describes the underpinning theory that constitutes the work-based learning field of study as well as the structure and components of the curriculum framework. Through illustrative case studies, the chapter demonstrates how the Middlesex transdisciplinary framework has provided opportunities for a variety of working learners to gain access to higher education qualifications that would otherwise have been closed. Each case study illustrates a different aspect of the framework and how it has operated to create opportunities for open learning and credentialing at the level of the individual, the organisation and, lastly, within an industry sector. This demonstrates the potential for transferability of some of the principles and approaches to other higher education curricular settings.

INTRODUCTION

Middlesex University’s Institute for Work Based Learning is internationally renowned for its innovative approach to credentialing and recognising learning from the workplace. This can provide opportunities for individuals with little or no previous experience of formal higher-level learning to engage with higher education and thereby open opportunities for personal and professional development. The innovations
introduced by the Institute for Work Based Learning at Middlesex have had a significant impact on enhancing opportunities for recognising and credentialing learning for an often overlooked and under-represented group in higher education, namely those in work (Leitch, 2006). In this sense, widening access to higher education for those in work is a key aspect of the conception of open learning that this chapter will describe. As well as opening up opportunities for work-based learners, the Middlesex framework also includes a systematic approach to credentialing work-based learning to lead to the award of a full range of university qualifications including Honours, Masters and Doctoral degrees. These credentialing systems include well-established procedures for accrediting prior learning as well as in-company training so that it can count directly towards the achievement of university qualifications.

Middlesex University’s validated work-based learning curriculum framework can be used to construct university programmes across all academic levels, offering a structure within which individuals and cohorts of learners can pursue negotiated learning programmes that capture learning opportunities from work and which enhance work/practice. This is underpinned by the establishment of work-based learning as a ‘field of study’ (Gibbs & Garnett, 2007; Portwood, 2000) at the university within which higher education awards can be conferred. The conception of the work-based learning field of study is transdisciplinary and this chapter will explore how this resonates with the idea of open learning. This will include a discussion of some of the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of Middlesex University’s validated work-based learning curriculum framework, which reflect an open approach to credentialing learning. The underpinning concepts include the nature of transdisciplinarity and some of the potential limitations of disciplinary-based approaches, the role of experiential learning and reflection, access to higher education and the contribution of communities of practice to work-based learning. The Middlesex work-based learning curriculum framework supports and promotes open learning in the sense that it is not limited to any particular academic discipline or subject but is rather designed to recognise higher-level learning that emerges through engagement with work and professional practice in a transdisciplinary context.

These aspects of open learning also resonate with the recent United Kingdom’s (UK) Higher Education Academy (HEA) report on the ‘conditions of flexibility’ that have “the potential to enhance student learning, widen opportunities for participation in higher education, and develop graduates who are well-equipped to contribute to a fast-changing world” (Barnett, 2014, p. 10). This report includes the requirement to ‘provide pedagogical openness’ as one of the conditions of flexibility in higher education. The work-based learning framework design, construction and operation is also coherent with the concept of ‘flexible learning’ as defined by the Commonwealth of Learning (2000). Specifically, certain contributory factors to the learning environment include a “convergence of open and distance learning methods, media and classroom strategies; learner-centred philosophy” (Commonwealth of Learning, 2000, p. 19). The Middlesex work-based learning curriculum framework has been designed to deploy open and distance learning methods that are delivered through online learning technologies providing a blended approach to learning. This can include online distance learning, recorded campus workshops and tutor support through a virtual learning environment and email, thereby opening opportunities for learning irrespective of a learner’s work environment or geographical location.

The learner centred and flexible approach embedded in the work-based learning curriculum framework provides greater ‘openness’ in terms of widening participation in higher education for a diverse range of students (Bowes, Thomas, Peck, & Nathwani, 2013). Professional and work-based learners can enrol from a number of different sources as illustrated by the case studies later in this chapter. For all types of work-based learners, accessing a programme that promotes personal and professional development by