What is work based learning?

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Introduction

You may have chosen to undertake a course to help you learn at work for your career progression, and this may be a Foundation Degree (FD). FDs help you to learn at work, for work, in order to enhance your skill base, your role, the quality of care you provide, your future employability and your ability to learn throughout your career, which is otherwise known as lifelong learning (LLL). This learning at work, for work, is referred to as work based learning (WBL). Therefore, to make the most of your studies, it is important that you understand the concept of WBL. You may initially find WBL difficult and challenging. This may be related to your preferred learning styles, and previous experiences of being on a course; however, one of the skills you will develop is learning how to learn on the job. Learning happens at work every day; however, in a busy, demanding work environment we do not always acknowledge the learning which takes place.

This chapter aims to help you understand the concept of WBL and how to make the most of learning while doing your FD. Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Define the concepts of WBL and LLL;
2. Understand the importance of LLL for you;
3. Identify the role of WBL in your workplace.

What is work based learning?

In this section we explore definitions of WBL and provide you with some activities that will help you understand how this relates to your course or workplace. In addition, it explores the link between WBL and lifelong learning.

The phrase ‘work based learning’ is often used to describe a unit of study that has a significant workplace element to it. For example, in your FD, you may have workplace tasks to complete that help you to learn on the job. There may be a course component that requires you and your manager to identify your learning needs and plan activities to meet those needs either in the classroom or in the workplace.

WBL differs from traditional classroom learning because it is centred on reflection on your work and occurs following some sort of action or problem-solving within your working environment. This is known as action learning. Action learning is a method for individual and organizational development. Working in small groups,
people tackle important organizational issues or problems and learn from their attempts to change things. Action learning brings people together to exchange, support and challenge each other in seeking to act and learn. Action learning on an FD course enables you to meet in small groups with other students or workplace colleagues to discuss and explore workplace problems and attempt to reach practical solutions. This type of learning requires new knowledge and developing the skill of learning how to learn in the workplace (Raelin 2000).

**Fatima, an FD graduate, comments on her experiences of using action learning.**

As a small group from different workplaces we chose to meet on a regular basis at the university to discuss areas which we had covered in class. I found this really beneficial as it allowed me to ask questions and share experiences in a safe environment.

The benefits of action learning for an FD student include:

- increasing your self-awareness and ability to identify personal development challenges;
- enabling you to engage in a voyage of discovery and enquiry with your peers in order to solve problems or issues;
- helping you to relate to other people and communicate more effectively;
- encouraging you to think reflectively, creatively and critically in achieving solutions to problems or issues;
- helping you to develop initiative and readiness to take responsibility for your actions;
- helping you to challenge the status quo and the ‘normal way of doing things around here’ in order to effect change;
- providing peer support, encouragement and collaboration;
- enabling individuals and teams to learn while working;
- encouraging the development of leadership skills in participants who take on different roles and responsibilities within the group to reach solutions to different problems or issues.

Chapter 2 explores the concept of action learning in more detail and the role that reflection plays in promoting learning at work is discussed in Chapter 4.

Your FD course is specifically designed to meet your needs as a learner and contribute to the longer-term development of your workplace. Each individual student on your course will have very specific individual learning needs. Your individual needs should reflect what knowledge and skills you must learn in order to undertake your work role as well as any specific areas of personal development which you identify. To help you explore the differences in learning needs among your fellow learners, undertake the following Time Out activities:
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Time Out: Understanding differing learning needs across organizations

Find someone within your group who is employed in a different role from you. Discuss what their individual learning needs are and compare these to your own. How similar or how different are they?

You are likely to be employed in an organization which is continuously undergoing change. As a consequence, the organization must respond to these changes and this can only happen through a skilled and knowledgeable, flexible workforce.

In your workplace, can you identify its vision, goals and priorities for the future? Now compare these with other students on your course – does the workplace vision identify the importance of learning and the need for a skilled workforce?

How does work based learning feature in your Foundation Degree?

Your FD will consist of a portfolio of activities designed to meet four key types of learning (Brennan 2007: 20):

- **Learning at work** – learning that takes place in the workplace.
- **Learning through work** – learning while working.
- **Learning for work** – learning how to do new or existing things better.
- **Learning from work** – learning from the experience of work.

For example, you may already have experience of working in your current role and have learned from that experience at work. In conjunction with this, you constantly refine the skills you have developed and are learning through work. The FD course may include a module which is taught in the classroom and where you will learn for work. Supporting this may be a WBL module which will help you draw the theoretical and practical elements together allowing you to learn from work.

How does your FD enable you to meet learning outcomes?

Your FD course will use a variety of methods to help you achieve both the prescribed course and your own individually negotiated learning outcomes. A **learning outcome** is a statement of what you are expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a period of learning. Learning outcomes are generally written to reflect four areas of learning:

- **knowledge** (demonstrate knowledge and understanding of …);
- **cognitive skills** (describe, compare, evaluate, apply, etc.);
- **subject-specific skills** (co-ordinates, balances, operates, handles, performs, calibrates, etc.).
key skills (these may be academic and/or technical skills defined by the university and the workplace).

At the beginning of your FD, the aim is to help you identify the knowledge and skills which you already have. This allows you to identify your prior learning and look back on the career journey you have taken so far. It acts as a vital starting point in the preparation for future learning at work. One of the most obvious ways that this is often demonstrated is through the use of a portfolio of learning. A portfolio is a useful tool to enable you to demonstrate significant areas of learning and professional competence derived from all formal and informal learning opportunities in the workplace. The portfolio is a compilation of learning intentions, accounts of learning activities, learning outcomes and records of reflective dialogues. Your portfolio can include evidence such as certificates, statements from colleagues, course work already completed and your Personal Development Plan or appraisal from your workplace. This is discussed in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7. The Time Out activity below will help you explore this further.

**Time Out: Identifying your learning**

Review your curriculum vitae and write down your key achievements and areas of learning in different jobs or activities you have been involved with.

Simon, a first year FD student, shares his experiences of identifying his key achievements and the impact this has had on his own learning:

On the first day of my Foundation Degree I was asked to consider areas where I felt learning had occurred while undertaking my workplace role. At the time I could not see the relevance of this activity but, as I have progressed through the first year of the Foundation Degree I can see how important it was in enabling me to understand how I learn.

Once you have identified what you need to learn, your FD course will require you to negotiate with your course tutor and/or employer what additional knowledge and skills you need to learn. It is very important that you have a clear focus of your learning priorities through the development of a learning contract. Learning contracts provide a formal framework for structuring your learning activities. For further detail about learning contracts, see Chapter 4. Your learning is personal to you and WBL enables you to customize what you need to know, through the identification of your personal needs, in order to fulfil your workplace role both now and in the future. The Time Out activity below will help you identify your learning needs.

**Time Out: Identifying areas for development**

Review your current job description and write down which areas you need to develop to carry out your role more effectively and efficiently.
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It is really important that once you have identified your learning, you are able to explain how this learning has occurred. This will be achieved through report writing, essays and project work as examples. There may be further opportunity for you to identify when learning has not gone to plan. In this instance, you may be given opportunities to make recommendations for future learning which you can revisit and evaluate in your PDP. Chapter 7 explores personal development planning in more detail.

How does work based learning contribute to your lifelong learning (LLL)?

The concept of lifelong learning is based upon the principle that formal learning takes place throughout your life, it does not stop because you have completed a course. Table 1.1 lists some of the differences between traditional approaches to learning and LLL.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional approaches to learning</th>
<th>Approaches to lifelong learning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content driven by the tutor, relates to information giving in the classroom, i.e. lectures</td>
<td>Based on the learners’ needs in relation to their occupational role. The learning experience is negotiated between the learner, their employer and tutor, and agreed in the form of learning objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher is in control of what learning should take place</td>
<td>The student is in control of what learning should take place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Didactic</strong>, rote learning, learning may be superficial</td>
<td>Uses methods such as action learning, problem solving, reflection, so deeper meaningful learning takes place</td>
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<tr>
<td>The learner is a passive recipient in the learning process</td>
<td>The learner is an active recipient in the learning process</td>
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LLL helps you to enhance your career and update your skills and capabilities to remain employable. LLL enables you to create programmes of study around priorities set by your work, career aspirations or personal interests. This ultimately promotes and helps you to develop skills in independent learning and moves away from the notion that lifelong learning is course dependent. To achieve this, you need to be motivated and develop skills and strategies to become a self-directed learner. Developing your own motivation to learn throughout your career is very important for LLL and we explore this further in Chapters 3 and 9.

What factors can affect the quality of your learning in the workplace?

Having discussed how your FD course is designed to promote WBL, we now turn our attention to the factors which affect the quality of your learning in the workplace.
Learning in the workplace is dependent upon the range of experiences available, the quality of support you are offered by colleagues, access to workplace supervision, your previous experience and your preferred learning styles. Workplace learning experiences need to be sufficient enough to meet the outcomes of the course which you are studying and your own development needs. In Chapters 2 and 3 we explore the impact that workplace culture has in the learning environment and in turn the impact this has on you.

**Who will support you during your course?**

The most important aspect of learning in the workplace is the human dimension whereby learning is facilitated in an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation between you, your employer (work based mentor) and your tutor. Your employer is central to the success of any WBL initiatives. They have first-hand knowledge and understanding of the complexities of your workplace and are best placed to guide you when choosing a suitable work based mentor. Try the Time Out activities below to help you explore your relationship with your employer and their support of your WBL initiatives.

### Time Out: Supporting learning in the workplace

**Reflect on your role in the workplace and think about the following points:**

- What have you learnt in the past six months?
- How did your employer help you to achieve this learning?

**In discussion with fellow students, identify how variable workplace experiences can impact on your learning:**

- What are the positives of your collective experiences?
- What are the challenging aspects of your collective experiences?
- From this discussion, what do you consider supports effective learning in the workplace?

Following completion of these activities, Table 1.2 provides a summary of features which promote effective WBL. Chapter 2 further explores the role of the student and employer in creating a supportive learning environment in the workplace.

As you can see from the Time Out activities, effective team work is essential to the success of your WBL in the classroom and in the workplace. To this end, it is important that individual roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. As a WBL student you need to:

- identify your learning needs through reflection and joint appraisal/negotiation with your work-based mentor and tutor;
- record your personal and professional progress regularly;
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- use opportunities to learn in the workplace and reflect upon these in a timely manner, integrating new knowledge into practice;
- provide evidence of achievement of personal, professional and workplace practice where required;
- maintain confidentiality at all times.

Table 1.2 Organizational readiness checklist for work based learning activities

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<tr>
<th>Organizational Readiness Checklist</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning is incorporated into everything people do.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Learning for learning’s sake is encouraged and rewarded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The organization supports teamwork, creativity, empowerment and quality.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Employees are trusted and encouraged to choose courses that they need.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. People with different job titles from different departments learn together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The organization promotes mentoring relationships to enhance learning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Learning is an integral part of meetings, work groups, and work processes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Everyone in the organization has equal access to learning.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Mistakes are learning opportunities.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. The organization encourages cross-training and rewards employees.</td>
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Source: Johnson (2001).

As part of your FD course you should have identified a work based mentor whose role is to provide regular support and guidance within the workplace. They should help you to integrate theory you have learnt in the classroom with your roles and responsibilities in the workplace. They should provide an opportunity to directly observe your work so that they can report your progress regularly to you and your tutor. They therefore have a key role in assessing, monitoring and evaluating your learning. The role of the mentor is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

Similarly, your course tutor has responsibilities for supporting guided reflection and action learning, helping you to integrate classroom learning with workplace activities. Their role is to assess the evidence you provide, liaise with your mentor on a regular basis to evaluate your progress and to make sure your workplace can support the range of WBL activities your course requires.

One of the challenges in this relationship for you might be your dual role as employee and WBL student. Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2009: 34) highlight some
of the ethical issues associated with WBL. They state: ‘Unlike campus based students, the ethical issues are likely to be more complex and more significant because the work-based learner operates within workplace, occupational and sometimes professional contexts.’ Access in the workplace to confidential and sensitive information, insider knowledge of the organization, honesty and deception, confidentiality, intellectual property and plagiarism are some of the issues they acknowledge. It is really important, therefore, that you set some ground rules with your employer and course tutor at the beginning of your course, perhaps at the time you are writing your learning contract.

In summary, this chapter has introduced you to the concept of WBL and how you can identify and make the most of learning in the workplace to meet your individual development needs. In Chapter 2 we will discuss how workplace culture affects your learning at work.

Key learning points

- WBL focuses on helping you to learn at work, from work, for work to enable you to perform your role to the best of your ability and provide high quality care.
- WBL focuses on learning through reflection following some sort of action or problem solving within the working environment to reach practical solutions.
- Your individual learning needs are personal to you and are shaped by your past experience, career history, workplace role and type of service you provide.
- Your FD course provides structured learning activities to achieve both prescribed and personally set learning outcomes.
- Learning contracts and portfolios of learning should be negotiated with your course tutor and workplace mentor who will work in partnership with you to achieve your objectives.
- Optimal learning takes place when you build good relationships with workplace colleagues, your mentor and your course tutor, and enables you to understand roles and responsibilities in the learning process.
- Developing skills and strategies to increase your ability to direct your own learning will enhance your career and your motivation as a lifelong learner.

Critical review questions

1 How can work based learning help you in the development of your occupational role?
2 How are your personal development needs met in your current job?
3 How do you envisage your career developing over the next five years?
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Web links and resources

- Department of Health.

- Lifelong Learning.
  http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/

- Skills for Health.
  http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/

Reading for interest


References


