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The Pedagogy of Placements in Criminology Teaching: An Interactive Parallel Model of Criminological Learning

Abstract: Formalised placements in criminological programmes are not a widely used teaching strategy in England and Wales (United Kingdom). This article presents the findings of a small study which explored how placements reinforced and enhanced the criminological understanding of the student and whether there were benefits for mentors. The preliminary results indicated a positive correlation between what the student had learned in the classroom, and how this was applied in the “real world”. Building on Wenger’s¹ communities of practice and Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith’s² triadic learning, there emerged a parallel model of interactive criminological learning for students and mentors; a model that could not be emulated through traditional pedagogical teaching alone, thus reinforcing the concept of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015)³, in a journey framed by Burch⁴ as that from unconscious knowledge and application to a conscious competent performance.

Keywords: pedagogy, criminology, mentoring, work-based learning, experiential learning, higher education

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- 1 E. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1999.
 - 2 R. Dalrymple, C. Kemp, P. Smith, Characterising work-based learning as a triadic learning endeavour, “The Journal of Further and Higher Education” 2012, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 75-89.
 - 3 D. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, USA: Pearson Education, London 2015.
 - 4 N. Burch, The Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill, <http://www.gordontraining.com/free-workplace-articles/learning-a-new-skill-is-easier-said-than-done/> (12.07.2017).

1. Introduction

The first teaching of criminology in Britain can be found as far back as 1921 in Birmingham, taught as a postgraduate course for medical students, where criminality was viewed as an illness to be treated rather than a behaviour that could be modified⁵. Since that time, there has been a steady increase in course provisions, gaining popularity as a choice of undergraduate study particularly in the last 20 years as instant access to crime and media stories excites and intrigues audiences⁶. This rise of interest is exemplified in the four-fold increase of applications for criminology since it was introduced at the University of Worcester (UoW) in 2014, where personal statements often quote for example, *CSI* or *Police Camera Action*⁷ as their inspiration to study criminal behaviour. Media sensationalising of sex, violence and organised crime depicts a skewed but somewhat sensationalised perspective of crime and criminality, and professional roles that bear little or no resemblance to the operational criminal justice sector. Amongst those applications received however, there is a clear group of individuals who understand the reality of crime and victimisation and whose interest has evolved through life experience or the desire to support those who pass through the criminal justice system.

At the time of writing there are 106 Higher Education (HE) providers on UCAS, including the University of Worcester, with the option of 234 criminology pathways, 31 of these describing a four-year course with placement (“sandwich”) opportunity. These “sandwich” courses generally appear to be structured as a year out to work with an organisation in their field to gain employment experience. The BA (Hons) Applied Criminology course at UoW was designed and developed in response to the identified needs of the criminal justice sector; it was recognised that despite what might be considered a relevant degree, a number of newly appointed staff lacked the ability to apply criminological learning to their work with offenders.

UK Quality Code for HE, Part B section 2⁸ of The Quality Assurance Agency for HE forms the basis for the following definition of Work Based Learning (WBL):

Work based learning is learning that is integral to a higher education programme, and which is based in the workplace and credited as part of the university programme. It is usually achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment, the assessment of reflective practice and the designation of appropriate learning outcomes.

This definition is embedded in the UoW strategy that commits the WBL element of a subject pathway, to equipping students with the academic knowledge and

5 E. Finch, S. Fafinski, *Criminology Skills*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016.

6 Y. Jewkes, *Media and Crime*, Sage, London 2012.

7 *CSI* and *Police Camera Action* are popular crime programmes in the UK.

8 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b> (31.05.2017).

professional values required for successful future employment. Thus, WBL and/or placements are recognised in HE programmes as legitimate resources that provide employment/sector experience and the opportunity to safely engage in evidence-based practice. The idea of the Applied Criminology programme, therefore, was to design a collaborative provision of knowledge and skills that are transferable into any organisation providing services for offenders as the Transforming Rehabilitation Strategy⁹ took hold. This interactive programme was aligned to Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith's¹⁰ notion of "the more interactive and stimulating the pedagogic conditions... the more realistic and relevant to participants the learning milieu is".

2. The Context

Facilitation is the educational skill of accessing the phenomenological world of the individual, textured in social and cultural variables and helping learners get in touch with their internal capacities to learn and to make sense of their experiences¹¹.

Jarvis's notion of bringing to life the individual learner's unique practical experience to enhance and embed learning is documented in his work of 2002, where he speaks about how a developmental environment is an integral part of building knowledge that becomes a characteristic of the student, rather than knowledge that is heard but then later forgotten; learning in the abstract.

The authoritative teaching model as outlined by Wetter Riechmann and Grasha¹², exemplifies abstract learning through traditional teaching methods, where lecturers deliver detailed information in lecture theatres, to large audiences without a point of reference for real-life application. The authors have experienced this type of teaching in their own learning. They have also encountered some European students who have highlighted the interactive approach within lectures, not previously experienced by them, as one of their reasons for studying criminology in UoW.

In very recent years, there has been a shift in the recruitment of practice-based staff in HE, to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience in specific vocational courses. It is recognised that in certain professions (Policing, Probation or Social Work for example) only those with operational knowledge can bring theory to life in a way that is effectively understood. However, despite this shift, Tennant et

9 Transforming Rehabilitation Strategy, <https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/transforming-rehabilitation/results/transforming-rehabilitation-response.pdf> (31.05.2017).

10 R. Dalrymple, C. Kemp, P. Smith, *Characterising...*, *op. cit.*

11 P. Jarvis, *The Theory and Practice of Teaching*, Routledge, London 2002, p. 80.

12 S. Wetter Riechmann, A.F. Grasha, A Rational Approach to Developing and Assessing the Construct Validity of a Student Learning Style Scales Instrument, "Journal of Psychology" vol. 87 Issue 2, pp. 213-223.

al.¹³ identify how in construction education there is an increasing preference for the recruitment of career academics. They subsequently argue that this undermines the enhanced value of contextualised teaching the practitioner can offer in pedagogical study. The study of criminology as a single discipline has historically been taught by established academics, those who have studied and researched crime and justice. However, with the expansion of the discipline to incorporate different subject areas such as policing, criminal justice and security, there has been a need to recruit practitioners as teachers.

The change in funding regulations has rendered HE Institutes open to business models that regard students as customers and need increased numbers to maintain financial viability. Unfortunately, this may cause a conflict of quantity versus quality as the universities may not perceive the applied forum of work-based learning as a financially viable option, given the intensive workload produced through collaborative working. In exploring the relationship of students and staff in teaching and research, Dickerson et al.¹⁴ argue that regarding students as consumers shifts the identity of the programme to a product that they purchase rather than the process of a journey of learning. Nevertheless, there is a political “push” for organisations to work more closely with HE Institutions to furnish certain professions, such as the police, with certificated validity¹⁵. Furthermore, there has been a “push” from the sector for courses that equip students with the appropriate employment knowledge and skills¹⁶ and it is not just the sector that are pushing for this but also “a new discerning student population” (Tennant et al.)¹⁷.

The ethos and style of delivery in teaching all criminology programmes at UoW is informed by, and aligned to, the interactive nature of practice and application of concepts to best develop the skills-base of students ready for the organisational setting. The authors, both from a practice background, draw from a range of professional knowledge¹⁸, skills and experience of working in the criminal justice

13 S. Tennant, M. Murray, A. Forster, M. Pilcher, Hunt the Shadow not the Substance: The Rise of the Career Academic in Construction Education, “Teaching in Higher Education” 2015, Online. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13562517.2015.1070342>

14 C. Dickerson, J. Jarvis, L. Stockwell, Staff-Student Collaboration: Student Learning from Working Together to Enhance Educational Practice in Higher Education, “Teaching in Higher Education” 2016, vol. 21, no 3., p. 250.

15 T. Green, A. Gates, Understanding the Process of Professionalization in the Police Organisation, “The Police Journal: Theory Practice and Principles” 2014, vol. 87, 2, pp. 75-91.

16 Future Criminal Justice Workers Start on New Degree at University of Worcester, <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/discover/future-criminal-justice-workers-start-on-new-degree-at-university-of-worcester.html> (31.05.2017).

17 S. Tennant, M. Murray, A. Forster, M. Pilcher, Hunt the Shadow not the Substance: The Rise of the Career Academic in Construction Education, “Teaching in Higher Education” 2015, Online, p.11.

18 The authors have a varied background in the criminal justice sector. For example Probation, Prisons and Substance Misuse. Their experience in working with offenders, victims and staff has

sector that corroborate the workplace as a community of practice and development, replicating Wenger's¹⁹ notion of mutual engagement to ensure "practice does not exist in the abstract". A key component of the Applied Criminology course is a formalised placement provision in each year of study that incorporates practice-based teaching with work-based learning, where those learning outcomes are mapped against the National Occupational Standards for the Justice Sector²⁰. It is based upon the idea of triadic learning that formulates the WBL experience as an endeavour that is academically aligned rather than based²¹ and that proactively involves the 'academic' as the facilitator. Furthermore, Kolb's²² model of experiential learning is embedded within the course and students are encouraged to consider how this model can be applied in practice to enhance their learning.

Over the past three years formative feedback²³ has indicated an intrinsic link between enhanced learning from classroom teaching with subsequent application in the placement setting. This is reinforced through anecdotal feedback from both students and mentors during placement reviews and in practice-based modules. In addition, feedback has been sought through formalised organisational reviews. All avenues of feedback have acknowledged the benefits of students being in placement, refreshing and developing criminological knowledge and reinvigorating practice. This inspired the authors to conduct a formal research study to further explore the correlation between university and work-based learning as environments of development.

3. The process for placement provision

At the UoW the process involved in the provision of a placement is bespoke to the Applied Criminology programme. All organisations providing placements are offered a two-day mentor training course, specific to the programme. This includes an overview of the course, the roles and responsibilities of all concerned and the process of mentoring the student to reach their full potential. The training uses a number of theoretical models (also taught to students) to structure the learning process, including Kolb's experiential learning model and Burch's four stages for learning any new skill. The former is used to develop and enhance reflective practice skills and the latter, a framework through which the learner and mentor travel from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence, a state of evidential practice that does

resulted in an accumulation of knowledge and skills which influence their teaching style.

19 E. Wenger, *Communities ...*, *op cit*, p. 73.

20 Skills For Justice, <https://www.sjfuk.com/> (6.06.2017).

21 R. Dalrymple, C. Kemp, P. Smith, *Characterising...*, *op cit*.

22 D. Kolb, *Experiential...*, *op. cit*.

23 Formative feedback was collated through student programme and module feedback.

not rely on consciously referring to criminological theory. The mentors develop their knowledge and skills to facilitate an effective learning experience for the student, one that will enhance learning in areas recognised as in need of development as well as embedding the evidence-base to the practical setting.

The students are assessed on an ongoing basis, in relation to their areas of interest, self-confidence and learning needs. They are then matched to the appropriate organisation as well as a mentor. Each student has a pre-placement, midway and endpoint review involving the mentor, student and WBL “academic”. These serve to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the requirements of the placement and the learning outcomes that need to be met. This enables ongoing monitoring, assessment and review.

Initially, during the learning process within the workplace environment, the mentor becomes the facilitator; instructs and plans the learning activities, such as observations, shadowing or project work for the student. However, as the student progresses through the course and further WBL experience, it is observed that they transition from the pedagogical learning process to an andragogic one; the responsibility for learning moves from the facilitator to the student. The student begins to self-evaluate, actively identify their own learning needs and to seek out new learning opportunities.

4. Methodology

A pragmatic approach to the study was considered to be the most efficient and effective way of gaining preliminary knowledge on the impact of the lecturers’ style of teaching, alongside the experience of practical application; ascribing “to the philosophy that the research question should drive the method”²⁴. Using an online survey, a questionnaire was developed for both work-based learning mentors and applied criminology students that incorporated a mixed method of data collection. The idea was to collect some statistical data that would inform our understanding of the usefulness of the placement process and its contribution to learning and application of theory to practice. The questionnaire was also designed to encourage some qualitative data that would provide a rationale for certain responses.

The rationale for the questions asked of the students was to ascertain their perceptions of the placement and how or if it supported their learning and development. These questions were also reflected in the mentor survey as it was felt prudent that we should explore the mentor’s opinion of the two-day training, as well

24 A. Onwuegbuzie, N. Leech, On Becoming a Pragmatic Researcher: The Importance of Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methodologies, “International Journal of Social Research Methodology” 2007, vol. 8, no. 5, p. 377.

as any benefits to both them as individuals and their organisation. This was with a view to inform a potential student placement and mentor recruitment strategy.

The authors (as practitioners and as criminology course leaders), being mindful of their potential bias given anecdotal feedback, paid particular attention to the framing of questions, so as not to lead either student or mentor participant to respond in a way that was supportive of the hypothesis. Bryman²⁵ discusses the need for objectivity in how survey questions are framed, avoiding questions that elicit an expected response. In doing so, the authors were confident that the data collected would be the participant's honest account.

The analysis of the data was undertaken using the framework of Braun and Clarke²⁶ that invites the researcher to follow six phases of analysis. This is a useful and recursive guide for small data sets of different data types, enabling the outcomes of statistical responses to be supported by textual rationales. In doing so, a thematic understanding emerged, not only through the learning for the student, but also through a developmental process for the mentor. The latter was not anticipated, but from it emerged a parallel process of learning involving the student, the mentor and the academic arena.

5. Findings

The cohort of participants consisted of 32 students (P) across two years (2014 and 2015 entry) and 37 mentors (M).

5.1. Students

Of the 32 students (27 female and 5 male) 34% (11) responded. Although seemingly a low response rate, this is in-line with Nulty's²⁷ findings (33%) of the average response rate for an online survey. An additional six students had consented but did not submit the questionnaire and interestingly, all those who did submit were female. Due to the small student cohorts, the year of study was not collated to maintain anonymity.

82% said the placement aspect of the course was an important part of their decision to undertake the BA Applied Criminology at the UoW. All 'strongly agreed' that the placement experience had enhanced their learning and supported the development of their employability skills in the criminal justice sector; 91% through observation of evidence-based practice, 82% development of reflective practice

25 A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 254-255.

26 V. Clarke, V. Braun, *Teaching Thematic Analysis: Overcoming Challenges and Developing Strategies for Effective Learning*, "The Psychologist" 2013, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 121.

27 D. D. Nulty, *The Adequacy of Response Rates to Online and Paper Surveys: What Can Be Done?*, "Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education" 2008, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 302.

skills, 55% development of communication skills, 64% enabled to better understand criminological theory, 91% to apply criminological theory to working with people in the criminal justice sector and 64% enabled to develop criminological thinking in academic writing. The collaboration of learning from academia and practice is clearly articulated in the following student comments:

“Identifying theory in practice and applying learning from lectures was a skill that came in my second year placements. This I don’t think I could have achieved as well without the prior knowledge base from lectures” (P1)

“Placement has helped me understand the academic side a lot more” (P3)

“The placement experience has not only enhanced my academic learning but also improved my general life skills for example self-confidence etc” (P2)

Students identified the value of academic learning at the UoW and the approach to, and understanding of, the operational setting; “While I agree that practice based learning has been enhanced through placement experiences, the foundation of knowledge from lectures and further reading has been invaluable” (P2). The authors suggest this further evidences the importance of the collaborative approach to learning as a noted in Wenger’s²⁸ notion of mutual engagement.

5.2. Mentors

The survey requested that mentors comment on the two-day training event. Of the ten that responded, eight felt it was very useful and two, useful, nine either agreed or strongly agreed that there were personal benefits in becoming a mentor with some suggesting it supported the development of their own practice (M8).

The results from the mentors have been split into two themes; benefits of placements to students and benefits of placements to mentors. The benefits identified for students were that it enabled them to develop reflective practice skills, with all ten either agreeing or strongly agreeing. It was also suggested that the opportunities they engaged with increased their employability in the sector by ensuring that “*when the student completed a piece of work we discussed how this would support future employment opportunities*” (M4). In terms of criminological learning, 8 either agreed or strongly agreed, that engaging in the placement enabled students to better understand and apply criminological theory; “*Students are able to reflect and demonstrate how theories fit into practise in line with an organisations policies and procedures*” (M10) providing opportunities to embed criminological concepts into real-life situations.

In exploring why mentors decided to undertake the mentoring role, all 10 agreed that they wanted to enhance their career prospects, it was an opportunity for self-development and a new challenge. All wanted the opportunity to develop others,

28 E. Wenger, *Communities...*, *op cit.*

which is reflective of the type of work they are engaged in; the empowerment of others.

In terms of the benefits for the mentors, mentoring was perceived as a way of developing their own practice. 3 strongly agreed and 6 agreed that the way in which the placements were structured, with the expectations clearly defined, was an important factor; *“the training was well organised and highlighted what a mentors role is but also what was expected from us as a mentor”* (M1). What was surprising and unexpected, was the way in which the mentoring role not only enlightened the mentor with new theoretical understandings, but also reinvigorated previous learning from their own programmes of work; learning they had perhaps forgotten or was over-shadowed from the day to day pressures of criminal justice work. What was expressed was the value this process of re-learning had provided through the opportunity *“to challenge my own working processes”* (M5) making them think about the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of working in a particular way and enhancing self-confidence; [I] *“learnt more about myself and that I am more knowledgeable than gave self-credit for”* (M6). Both indicate that the mentoring experience was a learning process in itself, whether re-visiting previous learning or the opportunity for new learning.

6. Discussion

The analysed responses strongly demonstrate a consensus from both mentors and students that engaging in a placement within the sector does enhance the students’ understanding and application of criminological theory. It provides a safe working environment in which the student can observe and try out theoretical ideas and encourages reflection on how evidence-based practice works in an operational environment as well as improving communication skills. Interestingly, this research has also highlighted that the benefits of placements far outreach that of the learning and development of the student but rather they can, and do, reinforce and reinvigorate the criminological understandings of the mentors. In doing so, this process of empowerment improves practice and the value of “self” through the sharing of knowledge; creating a learning environment referred to by Wenger²⁹ as collaborative and interconnected between knowledge and “real world” events. So, whilst reinforcing the effectiveness of the triadic model, it also recognises the value for mentors. In doing so, it is suggested by the authors that the challenges, complexities and problems identified by Dalrymple Kemp and Smith³⁰ can be managed by the effective engagement of *trained* mentors in a model of parallel learning.

For those mentors who have not engaged in previous *formal* criminological learning, the mentoring experience has provided, for many, an opportunity for

29 E. Wenger, *Communities...*, *op cit.*, p. 73.

30 R. Dalrymple, C. Kemp, P. Smith, *Characterising...*, *op cit.*

informal learning of the criminological theory and models that underpin their practice. They too appear to progress through the four-stage model as they begin to reflect on and understand the “why” and the “how” they work in a particular way. It is a journey mirroring that of the students; a parallel journey where the difference of working experience (professional knowledge) versus academic study (theoretical knowledge) leads to a mutual engagement in pedagogical learning.

Those mentors with previous criminological learning appear to have drawn upon knowledge that has become an abstract memory, unconscious competence; “doing things right without having to think about it”³¹. This criminological understanding is fragmented in the memory of the mentor and has lost its conceptual meaning but continues to underpin their practice. The impact of the mentoring experience progressively recreates the piece of theory as a “live” concept, one that is then consciously applied and understood in its fullest form again. This state of conscious competence has a positive impact on both mentor and student where they can discuss and reflect on theory, how it applies to certain situations and/or offenders or victims, giving meaning and understanding to the interventions they are providing. Kolb’s³² model can also be considered at this point as both mentor and student travel through the learning cycle together, contributing to the student moving from a state of unconscious incompetence to the ideal position of conscious competence. For the aforementioned category of mentor, they move from unconscious competence, arguably a state of complacency³³ that can result in poor practice, back into conscious competence, thereby creating for both mentor and student what could arguably be described as a utopian position for learning.

7. Conclusion

Given the findings of the research, which the authors acknowledge has its limitations and is course specific, it is believed that the identified significance of the provision of mentor training and subsequent mentor experience resolves the challenges found in the triadic model and assumes instead, a model of parallel learning where the student, mentor and academic engage in a journey of interaction, sharing knowledge, skills and experience. Each learner has the opportunity to embed their learning or re-learning into a contemporary criminal justice scenario, one which values the complexities, and often inflexible manner of practice. This enables the piecing together of how evidence supports that practice in the perpetually changing and therefore, challenging criminal justice environment of England and Wales.

31 N. Burch, The Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill, <http://www.gordontraining.com/free-workplace-articles/learning-a-new-skill-is-easier-said-than-done/> (12.07.2017).

32 D. Kolb, *Experiential...*, *op. cit.*

33 B. Bates, *Learning Theories Simplified*, Sage, London 2016, pp. 102-103.

In view of these findings, it is the authors' recommendation that 1) placements should form a central component to more criminology courses, or, at least an opportunity to engage with the sector that reflects the interactive parallel learning model, 2) students on placements should have WBL mentors and 3) identified mentors should receive mentor training specific to the course. And finally, the WBL model should incorporate reviews that explore the application of theory to practice. In doing so, these recommendations align to the proposed interactive parallel model of learning.

8. Questions

- How can universities manage the tension between the benefit of placements with the business model of increasing student numbers?
- How might collaborative relationships be developed with relevant organisations to facilitate student placements?
- How can universities ensure the alignment of both academic and professional knowledge in teaching provisions?
- What benefits would a placement bring to your course/organisation?
- Would you consider incorporating that placement based on the interactive parallel model of learning?

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