

The challenging economic situation education essay

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Research carried out by Tomlinson (2008) looked at how students in higher education view the role of their degree in shaping their future employment prospects. It was found that students viewed that having a degree qualification was a significant boost to their level of employability which would provide them with advantages in the working world. They also viewed that a degree qualification would open up a broader variety of economic, occupational and social opportunities that might otherwise be limited. The main motivation for most students entering higher education is to gain a higher degree qualification to be able to get a better job. It is a fact that the better qualified job seekers have far greater employment opportunities (Johnes, 2006, cited in Pool & Sewell, 2007). The student's views in Tomlinson's (2008) research suggested that they were concerned with the increasing amount of competition for graduate employment opportunities. There is an increasingly tough entry and congested graduate market as there is a vast amount of graduates with the same qualifications. Due to this it is difficult to distinguish between the students who were all similarly qualified. Students need to add value and distinction to their degree, mainly as a way of standing out from other graduates with similar qualifications. The task that is facing students now is that of gaining a positional advantage in the working market where employers are placing increasingly less emphasis on academic credentials (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Employers want to hire graduates with relevant subject specific skills and knowledge, but at the same time they are looking for well developed, generic skills in a number of areas (Harvey, Moon, Geall & Bower, 1997). The model illustrated in figure 1 shows the essential components of employability. It suggests that students

need to be provided with opportunities to access and develop the components within the circle of the key and they must reflect and evaluate on these experiences. This will result in the development of higher levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem which are the vital links to employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007). This pictorial model explains the main concepts of employability and shows that it is the 'key' to choosing and securing occupations in which a graduate will have the opportunity to achieve success and fulfilment. Bandura (1995, p. 17) states that: "A major goal of formal education should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, efficacy beliefs, and intrinsic interests to educate themselves throughout their lifetime". Therefore, if students gain work experience and are encouraged to reflect and evaluate on the experiences, self-efficacy can be increased. Self-belief is an important factor and a student with this belief will be far more likely to gain a position than one who does not have it. This is also evident in Dearing's (1997) enquiry into higher education as he states that graduates need good employability attributes in order to gain an advantage when looking for a job. Including work experience in higher education can give you a wider skills set and make you a more rounded individual before you start work. It is questionable whether university style academic learning provides greater advantages than apprenticeship style learning. This is because areas of knowledge and skill which are technical or employer-specific in nature can only be learnt at that specific work place. So learning on the job could be more valuable for the employer. However Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised learning as a social and cultural process and it is clear that university students are able to draw upon a number of

different cultural and educational advantages. They are more able to access the types of experiences that add value to their curriculum, as well as the social and personal skills that are increasingly being valued by employers in the elite end of the market. According to The Pedagogy for Employability Group (2006), it is broadly agreed that graduates are more likely to secure employment if they have work experience. Research points to work experience as being something that prospective employers value greatly in graduates. Practical experience in the working industry gives students an advantage when they start looking for a job. A study by Cranmer (2006) found that structured work experience and employer involvement in the design of degree courses and provision was found to have positive effects on graduates' ability to find graduate-level jobs within six months of graduation. The University of Hertfordshire works closely with experienced business people to plan its academic programme (University of Hertfordshire, 2013). This helps their students to develop the skills and experience needed to stay one step ahead in the job market, and the employers will get the highly skilled graduate they are looking for. University gives students increased knowledge and skill levels and putting these credentials together with work experience should increase employability prospects. Student work experience means that the workplace is used in a way which supports students in connecting different types of knowledge, skill and experience. The work experience undertaken involved coaching an elite group of rhythmic gymnasts aged 12 -17. The sessions had to be planned and lead solely but were supervised by the head coach. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Jones, 2006) suggests that higher mental functions (for example,

communication and problem solving) develop through interactions and collaborations with others and this happens within a zone of proximal development. The zone puts forward the notion that the learner receives instructional support from a higher qualified person as individuals cannot learn in isolation. The learner can internalise new ideas from this which will mean that they are more capable of being able to solve the problem in the next situation in the best way. This is why having the mentor to guide the learning experience is vital and it was found that having her nearby added value to the sessions. Coaching has been extensively defined as a learning process (Brock, 2008). Learning is the process which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience and knowledge is a transformation process that is continuously created and recreated (Kolb 1984). Experiential learning is perhaps the most significant focus today for educators in the workplace as well as in colleges and universities. This model for experiential education, triangulates personal development, work, and education, placing equal importance on each point of the triangle. Through attending university, knowledge and concepts within the coaching modules have been used when working at the gym. This had also worked the other way round as having experience enables academic theories to be understood in a much clearer way than only having classroom knowledge. For example, learning in lectures about progression and the importance of this in order for athletes to improve can then be applied to the real context. When coaching at the gym using learner theories this importance can then be understood. Throughout the work experience it had now been established that reflective practice is one of the most important concepts in forming improved coaching

performance. Creating reflective practice means developing ways of reviewing our own teaching so that it becomes a routine and a process by which we might continuously develop. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is a useful model by which to develop our practice. The learning cycle suggests that it is not enough to only have an experience to enable us to learn. It is essential to reflect on the experience, to overview it, and formulate concepts which can then be applied and tested out in new situations. A link needs to be formed between the theory and action, by planning, acting out, reflecting and relating it back to the theory. Kolb's (1984) experiential cycle comprises four different stages of learning from experience which follow on from each other: Concrete experience is followed by reflection on that experience. This is then followed on by abstract conceptualisation where the aim is to learn from the experience which will bring about the construction of ways to adapt the next occurrence of the experience. This in turn will lead to the next concrete experience and the loop should continue. The learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the action in the situation. Kolb and Fry (1975) argue that the learning cycle should be approached as a continuous spiral but it can begin at any one of the four points. During some coaching sessions the process started with active experimentation where skills were taught without knowing whether the new technique would work or not. It was through this active experimentation that new experiences and therefore learning from the experience was able to occur. For example, one girl had problems with her pirouettes and by experimenting with her preparation position the correct skill could be

accomplished with the correct biomechanical principles. This led to the realisation that, sometimes risks need to be taken in order to improve knowledge. There is however an issue that arises from this model in that the idea of learning stages does not equate to most people's reality of thinking. The problem is the sequence of the model as Dewey (1933) has said (in relation to reflection) a number of processes can occur at once and stages can be jumped. This model seems too simplistic and pays insufficient attention to the complex process of reflection. There is a substantial role of reflection and reflective practice in professional development as it facilitates professional development. It is used to describe thinking that is meta-cognitive (Panda, 2004) for example, thinking about the process of thinking. The beginning of the study and application of reflection was facilitated by Dewey (1933; 1938) and his ideas express that experience plays a fundamental role in education. His model of reflective thought and action is focused on slowing down the decision making process so that lessons from past experience can inform judgments about what to do in current situations. This was often used in coaching as until a decision was made of how to correct a skill, the correction was not given. This is because there was a need to analyse first before a decision was made to ensure correct knowledge was being transferred. The process involves observing the situation objectively and judging how to proceed in a situation, based on previous experience and knowledge. Reflective learning takes place in problem identification, hypothesis formulation, and its testing in action. Dewey understood that effective education through reflection should aim at 'making sense of the world', and as a consequence this should be related to

experience. Often in coaching we cannot actually say what we know and when we try to describe it we find it difficult. Intelligent action is known as knowing-in-action. This tacit knowledge is professional knowledge that is embedded within practice. However when a practitioner becomes aware of their thoughts, they can also then be aware of alternate ways of thinking about the reality of their practice. Schon's (1995) theory separates 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. Reflection-in-action occurs at the time of action, and guides the process of action through already known knowledge. Reflection-on-action occurs when the action has already taken place, and the action is reviewed afterwards. As a student being put into a situation of uncertainty, practice of reflection-in-action can be developed through coaching. Thinking on the job was evident throughout the experience as problem solving tasks occurred and needed to be solved efficiently. Also reflection-on-action occurred when the sessions needed to be reviewed with new lesson plans and improvements being formed for future sessions. Robinson (2010), states that evaluation drives change for every next coaching session and it must be constructed in a significant way, which can only happen through the process of reviewing. Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasises the idea that much of what is learned is specific to the situation in which it is learned. Situated learning has assisted the role of raising our consciousness to certain aspects of learning that were not fully valued in education (Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996). It is clear that within gymnastics that situated learning is the best way to improve knowledge as without having practical experience coaching cannot be learned. However academic theories need to be known so that applications to physical

coaching can be made. For example within the elite programme, periodisation of the yearly programme is extremely important. The gymnasts need to be able to peak at the right time and without the academic knowledge of how to do this the whole coaching process would not work. Also boundary crossing (Engeström, 1996) refers to the idea that the zone of proximal development facilitates learning in the workplace as well as the classroom. One of the main characteristics of boundary crossing is that it involves a process of horizontal development. To develop, learners have to reach the capability to be able to switch between different forms of expertise for the demands of different contexts so the zones of proximal development are crossed. We now live in a learning age where it is the norm to engage in retraining and personal development throughout our studying and working lives. Continued professional development (CPD) combines continuous learning and professional development and is an aid in progressing careers. CPD experiences are considered as a means of introducing or enhancing knowledge, skills and attitudes (Kennedy, 2005). For example, Eraut (1994) states that the context in which professional knowledge is acquired is important. Learning in context actually helps us to understand the nature of that knowledge. One model of CPD is the award-bearing model. It relies on the completion of award bearing forms of study (Kennedy, 2005) that are external from university. These awards are put in place to ensure that quality of practice is carried out and this can be validated by the governing bodies of the particular sport. I am a level two rhythmic gymnastics coach and currently undergoing the level three British Gymnastics qualification. Keeping up to date with knowledge and skills is vital in gymnastics. The code

of points is constantly changing and there is a need to be aware of new technical requirements as well as new coaching techniques for new skills. I recently attended a workshop for coaching and judging for the new code introduced earlier this year. Learning is complex but it is also affected by others and the CPD coaching/mentoring model characterises the importance of the one-to-one relationship. The key to the model is that professional learning can take place within the context it is intended which will enhance learning. The learner is guided by their more experienced coach who will mentor them throughout their professional development. In order for the coaching/mentoring model of CPD to be successful, participants must have well-developed interpersonal communication skills (Rhodes and Beneicke, 2002) as the quality of inter-personal relationships is crucial. The matching of those involved is important as there needs to be an element of trust within the relationship. Also respect for the mentor is vital so that the relationship provides a supportive but challenging opportunity for practice. In this instance I am very lucky to have a mentor who is an international level five coach with a huge amount of experience. She is also very keen to help me become the best coach I can be as it is hoped that one day I may reach as high a level as she is. Mentors become the facilitators for developing knowledge in reflective thinking, cognitive development, and problem solving with the protégés who they work with (Barnett, 1995). Continuous learning from the mentor will keep going as she has a vast amount of knowledge and experience in the sport, and it is important to take as much from her as I possibly can. Continuing with a reflective process throughout coaching is vital to be able to aid developmental needs. Gilbert and Trudel

(1999, cited in Denison, 2007, chap. 5) argue, coaching knowledge is not attained by the coach simply being there, they need to be actively engaged in the session and reflect on their own coaching performance. There is a need to regularly look forward to how we want to be, reflecting on the skills and knowledge that we presently have to work towards a future direction. Griffiths and Guile's (2003) connective model is key to developing learning holistically. Educational institutions and workplaces need to have developed a shared understanding about their individual roles in assisting learners to develop as boundary crossers. Learning in higher education needs to be transferable and useful for the workplace. This is why having the opportunities to model and implement solutions throughout real life work experience is a key process for personal development. This work experience process has been a transformational experience, a learning process of change. I now know what it is like to work with elite level gymnasts and I am aware of the knowledge needed to coach them. I need to develop my knowledge and skills further to be able to reach the level I want to coach. Through writing this assignment I am now even more aware of the importance of gaining work experience along with my degree to enhance my future employability prospects. In a way I wish that I gained more work experience in the first year. During the next academic year I hope to gain some experience in sports development. This is because in the future I aim to help develop rhythmic gymnastics in this country as I believe that there is a lot of work to be done within this field. I also want to coach and be able to produce elite gymnasts but without the right developmental structure in place this will be very difficult. Therefore I would like to venture into the area

of sports development and I hope that the work experience module next year will help me to gain valuable experience and put me in good stead towards employability in the future.