Work-based placement learning and the development of a reflective capacity

Professor Ursula Lucas and Dr. Phaik Leng Tan

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Bristol Business School,
University of the West of England
Coldharbour Lane
Frenchay
Bristol BS16 1QY

E-mail: Ursula.Lucas@uwe.ac.uk
Abstract

This paper describes the conduct and findings of a project that investigates the development of reflective capacity during work-based placement learning and its relationship to student final year academic performance. The project is funded by the Higher Education Academy and the Charitable Trusts of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales.

Within undergraduate education there is an increasing emphasis on the need for reflection as an integral part of learning to learn. This applies to both substantive studies and the maintenance of personal development portfolios. Consequently, there is a growing emphasis by professional bodies on the development of a reflective capacity to support professional judgment. Hence, this project draws on the work of Baxter Magolda (1992, 1999, and 2001) on “ways of knowing” (epistemological beliefs). It is argued that her work has been central to a growing understanding of the way in which students develop a capacity to think critically and reflectively. For example, key distinctions arise between a student who has a dualistic view of knowing, seeing knowledge as certain or absolute, and another student who sees knowledge as constructed and requiring judgment based on evidence. Such distinctions can be related to key differences in academic performance. Baxter Magolda’s work also points to the importance of work outside the university (such as voluntary activities or year-long placements) in the development of a reflective capacity. The project’s objectives are to identify: (i) the nature of the reflective capacity brought by business studies and accounting undergraduates to their work-based placement and/or their final year studies; (ii) the elements within the work-based placement that support, encourage or inhibit the development of a reflective capacity; and (iii) how the reflective capacity brought by undergraduates from their work-based placement is related to their academic performance in their final year of undergraduate study. The paper will describe and justify the research methodology and method adopted: extended semi-structured interviews with 17 students (currently undertaking placement and having completed placement). The findings suggest that, whilst there appears to be limited development of ways of knowing arising from the placement, improved academic performance may arise from changes in self-efficacy. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for pedagogy.
1. Introduction

The rationale for this research project, which is funded by the Higher Education Academy and the Charitable Trusts of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, arises from the increasing emphasis within undergraduate and professional education on the development of a reflective capacity. The capacity to reflect underpins the exercise of professional judgement and ethical awareness. It also regarded as an integral part of learning to learn. Since the adoption of the Dearing principles, universities in the United Kingdom have sought to integrate reflective practice into their undergraduate curricula. The need to develop reflective practice is also a key aspect of professional learning.

The aim of the project was to investigate the development of reflective capacity during work-based placement learning and its relationship to student final year academic performance. Its objectives were to enquire into:

1. the nature of the reflective capacity brought by business studies and accounting undergraduates to their work-based placement and/or their final year studies.
2. the elements within the work-based placement that support, encourage or inhibit the development of a reflective capacity
3. how the reflective capacity brought by undergraduates from their work-based placement is related to their academic performance in their final year of undergraduate study.

This project draws on the work of Baxter Magolda (1992, 1999, 2001) on “ways of knowing” (epistemological beliefs). The latter has played a central role in supporting the growing understanding of the ways in which students develop a capacity to think critically and reflectively. Extended semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 students (currently undertaking placement and having completed placement) to explore their ways of knowing and their experience of work-based placement.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Sections 2, 3 and 4 will briefly provide the background to what is meant by the development of a reflective capacity, “ways of knowing” and the role of work-based placement learning. The second section will describe and justify the research methodology, method adopted and research context. Section 7 discusses the findings of the project and the paper then concludes with Section 8, a discussion of the implications of these findings for pedagogy.

2. What is meant by ‘the development of a reflective capacity’?

When students graduate and enter a fluid and dynamic professional and managerial life, there is an expectation that they will develop as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987). A reflective practitioner is capable of more than just an instrumentalist approach to problem-solving. The latter involves the straight-forward application of theory and techniques derived from a body of systematic, scientific knowledge. However, in real-life, practitioners are challenged by complex and ill-defined problems in unique situations. This demands an active, rather than a routine or habitual, response. Schön argues that it requires reflection-in-action. This involves a drawing on experience, a connection with one’s feelings and being aware of one’s ‘theories in use’. He describes this vividly:
‘The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.’ (Schön, 1983, p.68)

Learning within higher education similarly expects that students will develop a capacity for reflection. However, it is unlikely to be of the same order as that developed within the messy realities of managerial and professional life. Thus it is helpful to have some way of identifying what is involved in the process of ‘reflection’. Accordingly, we shall discuss below the work of Mezirow.

Mezirow (1991, p.100f) draws on and extends Dewey’s (1933) notion of reflection. Mezirow asserts that we should distinguish between three types of reflection. He argues that reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process or premise(s) in relation to a problem or situation. Reflection on assumptions underlying content, as described by Dewey, would lead one to consider facts or evidence. However, we also reflect on the assumptions underlying process and this leads to a questioning of how one deals with a problem: reviewing the effectiveness of information-search strategies or the appropriateness of particular techniques for the manipulation of data and evidence. Reflection on premises involves a questioning of assumptions about shared meanings, the validity of accepted norms, in other words, a making problematic of the previously taken-for-granted. Because premises are seen to be special cases of assumptions, Mezirow goes on to distinguish between reflection and critical reflection. Reflection involves a critique of assumptions whereas critical reflection involves the critique of premises.

Mezirow also distinguishes between reflective and non-reflective action. Non-reflective action can take two forms: habitual or thoughtful action. Students are expected, initially, to learn and then be able to apply basic problem-solving techniques within their substantive area of study. In time, this may become habitual or taken-for-granted as tasks that initially seemed ill-structured become well-structured as students become more experienced and knowledgeable. For example, a student may learn double-entry bookkeeping. At first some understanding of the basic concepts underlying double-entry is required but, in time, it becomes a taken-for-granted way of handling data and recording transactions. Other examples might be the statistical techniques used in marketing or financial management, the calculation of accounting ratios, costing methods, and PEST and SWOT analysis techniques.

Thoughtful action ‘makes use of existing knowledge, without attempting to appraise that knowledge, so learning remains within pre-existing meaning schemes and perspectives.’ (Kember et al, 2000, p.384). In other words, underlying assumptions are not critiqued. Kember and colleagues point out that this covers a wide-range of learning within higher education and covers all of Bloom’s (1956) well-known categories of knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis. For example, the use of financial data recorded by a double-entry system to produce the primary financial statements; the adoption of generally accepted approaches for inventory valuation and the preparation of budgets.

Reflection involves the critique of assumptions. For example, a student might reflect on process (the applicability of certain costing techniques within individual contexts) or on content (the nature of costing evidence available for use by those techniques). Critical reflection involves the critique of premises. Mezirow (1991, p.223) describes this as ‘transformative learning’: the
transformation of beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that constitute students’ meaning schemes. This involves reflection on presuppositions or the assessment of assumptions implicit in beliefs, including beliefs about how to solve problems. In the case of the costing example referred to earlier, this might involve a realisation that there was a political agenda implicit in the costing method which was adopted or that costing methods take-for-granted the exclusion of costs which are difficult to measure, such as environmental impact. Using an example of auditing, this questioning can take place at a number of levels as students begin to appreciate that ‘audit techniques’ are actually grounded in certain assumptions about the nature and function of financial statements and evidence itself. Similarly, a student might realize that ethical issues might not solely arise out of individual actions, but might be implicit within certain management practices or the way in which regulatory systems are organized.

The above discussion has highlighted four types of action which vary in the types of activity and reflection involved, and in the nature of the critique. These are summarised in Table 1.

The process of perception and transformation involved in critical reflection is not straightforward. Mezirow (1990, p.1) points out the powerful influence of our frames of reference and the assumptions implicit within these. He terms these ‘habits of making meaning’ and argues that they play a cardinal role in learning. It is this emphasis on such habits and frames of reference that distinguishes critical reflection from the cognitively-based notion of critical thinking skills. More than just cognition is involved. Emotion and identity are involved too, as deeply held beliefs are challenged. For example, students might start to consider issues of who to trust and when to be sceptical.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of action</th>
<th>Nature of activity/reflection</th>
<th>Nature of critique</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitual action</td>
<td>Well-structured repetitive tasks</td>
<td>No critique</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoughtful action</td>
<td>Higher order cognitive processes to analyse, perform, discuss and evaluate</td>
<td>No critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Critique of assumptions about content and process</td>
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<td>Problem-posing</td>
<td>Critical reflection</td>
<td>Critique of premises</td>
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Table 1  Types of action, the nature of activity and critique (Mezirow, 1991)

Brookfield (1987) points out that the development of a reflective scepticism - a key attribute for any professional - is a major affective outcome of critical reflection. It involves ‘a readiness to test the validity of claims made by others for any presumed givens, final solutions, and ultimate truths against one’s own experience of the world.’ (ibid, p.22, emphasis added). Reflective scepticism means that, even when a commitment is made to a particular way of viewing the world, or set of values, it is an informed commitment and the student remains critically aware. In so doing, students have to take a stand, to question authority and to develop their own voice. Critical reflection thus places great expectations on the student’s capacity not only to think critically but to move towards critical being, which will ultimately involve action (Barnett, 1997, p.1). Returning to Schön’s vivid description of reflection-in-action, the practitioner (or student) ‘allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique’. Thus reflection-in-action involves a willingness, or a capacity to develop,
qualities of openness, of being prepared to acknowledge uncertainty and of being, ultimately, to take a view and act.

To conclude this section, the following elements are assumed to underpin a reflective capacity:

- A motivation that leads to a constant questioning
  - of the taken-for-granted
  - of deepening layers of assumptions
  - of one’s own motivations
- An openness to surprise and puzzlement
- An acceptance of the prevalence of uncertainty and ambiguity
- A willingness to take a personal view or decision

One would not expect undergraduates to fully achieve such capacity. Indeed, the notion of the fully reflective practitioner is more of an aspiration than a practical possibility. However, one might expect that students would start to develop such a capacity during their studies. To do so they must be willing to question habits of making meaning to critique premises that are so taken-for-granted that they are rarely questioned. Mezirow identifies three types of premise that are implicated within this critique: psychological, cultural and epistemic. Psychological premises are inhibitory rules that are unconscious but that cause anxiety and guilt when we violate them, for example some students may see ability as fixed and stable whereas others may see ability as amenable to change and growth (Dweck, 1999). Cultural premises are embedded in the dominant cultural values of a society and are transmitted by social institutions. They inform our conduct in political, economic, occupational and religious spheres. Thus students might call into question the teaching and learning regimes that operate within universities with their assumptions about power relations and the role of the learner (Trowler, 2002). Epistemic assumptions relate to beliefs about knowledge: its nature, source and use. The latter is the premise that is most immediately relevant to the study of subjects within undergraduate education. Accordingly, the next section contains a review of the findings of research into the nature of students’ beliefs about knowledge (or ways of knowing) and how these affect their ability to develop a reflective capacity.

3. Ways of knowing and the development of a reflective capacity

3.1 ‘Ways of knowing’

A wide range of research has been conducted into students’ beliefs about knowledge (epistemologies) within higher education, although most of this research has taken place in the US, and relatively little in the UK1. Over several decades interview research has shown that students vary in their beliefs about knowledge and that this affects the way in which they learn

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1 This project draws on the work of Baxter Magolda (1992) but is also informed by an understanding of the broader framework of research into personal epistemologies. Hofer (2004a, p.1) points out that the foundations of most models of epistemological understanding can be traced to Perry’s (1970) scheme of intellectual development during college years (within the US). However, work since then varies in terms of the assumptions that underpin the respective models, their associated research methods and their focus of educational interest. For a more detailed discussion of these models, see Lucas and Tan (2006).
and make judgments (Perry, 1970; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Baxter Magolda, 1992). Sometimes these are referred to as ‘stages of intellectual development’ (Perry, 1970) or more recently, ‘ways of knowing’ (Belenky et al., 1986; Baxter Magolda, 1992). This project draws on the work of Baxter Magolda since, to a large extent, she has synthesised findings from earlier research through her large-scale empirical studies and she also incorporates issues relating to identity.

Baxter Magolda asserts that an understanding of students’ intellectual or academic development should be:

‘at the heart of effective educational practice. Students interpret, or make meaning of, their educational experience as a result of their assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge. Such assumptions, referred to by researchers as epistemic assumptions (Kitchener, 1983), collectively form ‘ways of knowing’ (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.3)

Baxter Magolda identifies four qualitatively different ways of knowing:

• absolute;
• transitional;
• independent; and
• contextual

An absolute way of knowing assumes that knowledge exists in an absolute form: it is either right or wrong. Students, in this case, will interpret differences in opinion between authorities as differences, not about the facts, but about detail arising from inappropriate application, misinformation or misunderstanding. This way of knowing assumes that all problems are well-structured and thus evidence is not needed to reach a conclusion.

A transitional way of knowing accepts that knowledge is certain in some areas but uncertain in others. Disagreements between authorities in areas of uncertainty are considered to arise because the facts are not yet known. It is assumed that in due course better evidence, techniques or theories will produce accepted facts.

An independent way of knowing represents a shift to an assumption that knowledge is mostly uncertain. This is accompanied by a recognition that authorities are not necessarily the sole source of knowledge. Thus a student’s opinion may be regarded as valid as that of an authority and there tends to be an ‘anything goes’ attitude. In this context the role of evidence is diminished.

A contextual way of knowing also assumes that knowledge is uncertain. However, the ‘anything goes’ attitude is replaced by a belief that knowledge is contextual and one judges knowledge on

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2 This research has been complemented by the work of King and Kitchener (2004) on the development of reflective judgment.

3 Gender-related patterns have been identified within ways of knowing. See Baxter Magolda, p.369f for an extended discussion of this issue. We identified gender-related patterns within our data. However, this aspect of our findings is beyond the scope of this research paper.
the basis of evidence in context. Thus knowledge claims can only be understood in relation to the context in which they arise.

There is a broad convergence in prior research about the nature of variation in these different ways of knowing, but there is less agreement on what these represent. Belenky et al. (1986) and Baxter Magolda (1992) distinguish ways of knowing from skills. They use the term ‘ways of knowing’ to describe the different perspectives from which individuals view the world and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority. They also argue that ways of knowing are bound up with self-concept, or identity. Thus Baxter Magolda, in describing the goal of learning, refers to the work of Kegan (1994) and uses his term of ‘self-authorship’. The latter is the ability to reflect on one’s beliefs, organise one’s thoughts and feelings in the context of, but separate from, the thoughts and feelings of others, and literally to make up one’s own mind.

‘self-authorship extends beyond critical thinking or making informed judgments because it is not a skill; it is, rather, a way of making meaning of the world and oneself. This concept is inextricably linked to [ ] – students’ epistemological development.’ (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.6).

A way of knowing thus simultaneously comprises three aspects:

- cognitive (how one makes meaning of knowledge);
- interpersonal (how one views oneself in relation to others); and
- intrapersonal (how one perceives one’s sense of identity).

Although these three aspects will be referred to separately at certain stages within this paper, they are assumed to be mutually constitutive and mutually confirming.

3.2 Effect of ‘ways of knowing’ on students’ approaches to learning

Students’ ways of knowing will act as a lens through which they view the world. Thus they affect how students see key aspects of their learning environment and the way in which they approach their learning. These key aspects comprise the way in which a student views, or frames:

- the role of the learner;
- the role of peers;
- the role of instructor;
- evaluation (of learning); and
- the nature of knowledge

Table 2 shows how students’ perceptions of these key aspects and their approaches to learning vary according to their way of knowing. Because each way of knowing provides a lens through which the learning environment is viewed, the task of the educator is not straightforward. A student with an absolutist or transitional way of knowing will not necessarily react positively to an open discussion forum. The lecturer will be deemed to have all the answers and the role of the lecturer will be considered to be that of conveying those answers to the student. Thus, for example, Gwen likes ‘teachers who will give you as much as you need and not just leave you with a little small idea and try and have you talk it out.’ (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.31). Where the lecturer attempts to encourage discussion about different ideas or theories, the student may
become impatient and wait for the ‘right’ idea to be conveyed. A student might refer to ‘discussion’ as being useful, but it might, in fact, transpire that the purpose of discussion is to help the student remember the ‘facts’ rather than to evaluate different theories. One can see, therefore, that an absolute knower will not necessarily take kindly to an instructor who encourages debate and questions. Such activities would only slow down the effective communication of the knowledge that the student needs. This student is likely to provide poor feedback on the teacher in a course evaluation questionnaire (Clouder, 1998).

Ways of knowing thus frame the way in which a student views the learning environment. The development of a reflective capacity might thus be an aim of higher education but, dependent on a student’s way of knowing within business and accounting, receptivity to this aspiration is likely to vary. If students possess an absolute way of knowing, then they are unlikely to either cope well with problem-solving in conditions of uncertainty nor react positively to challenges to deeply-held assumptions. By way of contrast, students who possess an independent or contextual way of knowing are likely to feel more confident, and be more effective, in such a situation. Thus a development of a reflective capacity will require that a student moves from an absolute way of knowing towards a contextual way of knowing.
Table 2  Baxter Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.30, amended)

Baxter Magolda’s research, a large-scale interview study with 101 students across a variety of subjects, was conducted in the United States (within four year undergraduate courses). Figure 1 illustrates her findings. She found that the absolute way of knowing was most prevalent in the first year of college (68 per cent of students) declining over the next three years to 46 per cent, 11 per cent and 2 per cent respectively. Transitional knowing increased in the first three years of
college (32 per cent, 53 per cent and 83 percent) and declined slightly in the final year (80 per cent). Independent knowing was scarcely evident in the first three years of college and represented 16 per cent of students in the final year. Contextual knowing was rarely evident comprising just 2 per cent in the final year. It can be seen that, based on Baxter Magolda’s findings\(^4\), we might assume that in the final year of a degree course most students will fall into the transitional category. Yet the development of a reflective capacity will be best supported by an independent or contextual way of knowing.

Figure 1  
Ways of knowing by year (data taken from Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.70)

There is a growing body of evidence that students’ beliefs about knowledge influence their learning (Hofer, 2004a). Baxter Magolda’s work has shown how a student’s epistemological beliefs or ‘ways of knowing’ are related to approaches to learning and to academic performance. However, it is recognised that there is likely to be disciplinary and cultural variation in findings. Zhang and Watkins (2001) found a relationship between cognitive development and approaches to learning. They also identified a relationship between cognitive development and achievement for an American group of students but not for a Chinese group. Lucas and Meyer (2005) found that accounting students who reported an absolute way of knowing also reported a surface approach to learning and those students who reported a more relativistic and committed way of knowing also reported a deep approach to learning. Tolhurst (2007) also found that students with more complex beliefs about knowledge achieved higher final grades. However, findings in this area are difficult to compare since a variety of instruments have been used to identify beliefs about knowledge or cognitive development.

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\(^4\) No large-scale research study has been conducted within the United Kingdom.
3.3 The characteristics of contexts and events that ‘impact’ upon existing ways of knowing

The development of a reflective capacity involves issues of identity or view of self, and change is not likely to be straightforward. Brookfield (1987) observes that ‘making the attitudinal shift to reinterpret as culturally induced what were initially held to be personally devised value systems, beliefs, and moral codes can be highly intimidating.’ (p.17). Thus there may be denial, or defensive responses before other belief or value systems are considered (if at all). Perry (1981) talks about the process of grief and sense of loss that is involved. It may be that conflicting feelings and ideas have to be integrated or reconciled and the student has to become comfortable with the new situation. Savin-Baden (2000, p.87) characterises this as involving ‘disjunction’, involving a fragmentation of part of, or all of the self. The belief systems involved may be so fundamental that the students see themselves as different persons. This is supported by the sixth conception of learning identified by Marton et al (1993); learning comprising changing as a person.

Baxter Magolda found that a move towards an independent way of knowing occurred after graduation for most students. Based on her findings from interviews following graduation, she identified several changes that were likely to support moves towards independent ways of knowing. These include moving to new environments such as work, studying as a postgraduate or taking part in voluntary activities. Working in such environments can reinforce self-confidence and self-efficacy. As discussed above, ways of knowing comprise three aspects:

- cognitive (how one makes meaning of knowledge);
- interpersonal (how one views oneself in relation to others); and
- intrapersonal (how one perceives one’s sense of identity).

It would appear that the post-graduation environments (or co-curricular activities during undergraduate study) might provide the interpersonal and intrapersonal development that is required to support a move towards an independent way of knowing. Environmental features that support a growing self-efficacy include: the organisation and evaluation of one’s own work, the need to evaluate multiple perspectives, choose plans of action accordingly and take independent decisions.

Similarly Zhang and Watkins (2001) found that students who indicated a greater extent of work and leadership experiences were more likely to exhibit independent or contextual ways of knowing. Bauer et al (2004) assumed that epistemological beliefs would be relevant for workplace learning. They proposed, firstly, that such beliefs would influence the extent to which students sought opportunities to profit from workplace learning and, secondly, that they would influence whether a student even envisaged the workplace to be a learning environment. However such a relationship was not found. They concluded that their findings showed that the influence of epistemological beliefs on workplace learning might be less important than theory suggests. Thus an assumption underlying the design of this project is that interpersonal and intrapersonal development is more likely to be stimulated within a work-based placement than in an academic environment.
4. **The role of work-based placement learning**

4.1 **The context of placement learning in UK undergraduate education**

In the UK, work-based placement learning has long been a feature of business and management education, usually being a compulsory requirement within most business studies degrees. In many accounting degrees, the placement is offered as an option but is not compulsory. It is an institutionalised procedure and, accordingly, is subject to Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)\(^5\) Codes of practice and Subject benchmark statements. The QAA ‘Code of practice for assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education’ (2001) defines placement learning as follows:

‘a planned period of learning, normally outside the institution at which the student is enrolled, where the learning outcomes are an intended part of a programme of study. It includes those circumstances where students have arranged their own learning opportunity with a placement provider, with the approval of the institution.’

It is therefore not intended to cover co-curricular learning outside an institution that is not a planned part of a programme of study, such as part-time, term-time and vacation work which students have arranged for themselves. Placements can vary in their timing and in their length. The focus of this research study is the ‘sandwich degree’ where the placement is a period of supervised experience, usually a minimum of 40 weeks, taking place in the third year within a four year undergraduate degree course\(^6\).

4.2 **Placement learning objectives**

The onus is on each degree programme to set out their learning objectives for its placements, operating within a framework set out by the QAA. Yet although placement learning is a well-established feature of undergraduate business programmes, the QAA Subject benchmark statements for General Business and Management programmes of study include only one reference to placement as follows:

‘There should be integration between theory and practice by a variety of means according to the mode of delivery including: work experience or placement, exposure to business issues, visits, and inputs from visiting practising managers.’ (QAA, 2000, 5.2).

There is no reference to placement learning within the QAA ‘Subject benchmark statements: Accounting’. However, where accounting programmes permit a placement these usually follow the practice of business and management programmes and the codes laid down by QAA.

The integration of theory and practice thus constitutes the only explicit reference to the purpose of placement learning within the Subject benchmark statements. However, the latter also focus on an area that is thought to be highly relevant to placement, the development of key skills. The benchmark statements for both General Business and Management and for Accounting set out a

\(^5\) The QAA was established in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education (the subscribers), and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies.

\(^6\) There are potentially four years to business and accounting degree courses. Level 1 and level 2 relate to years 1 and 2. A placement year takes place in year 3. Level 3 refers to the final year.
series of key skills as learning outcomes. A revised version of the Subject benchmark statements for General Business and Management (QAA, 2006) were issued for consultation in August 2006. The revised version contains the following statement: ‘business and management are strongly related to practice and therefore there should be a strong link between the development of skills and employability of graduates’ (para. 4.1).

An illustrative list of these skills comprise:

- cognitive skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis;
- effective problem solving and decision making;
- effective communication;
- numeracy and quantitative skills;
- effective use of ICT;
- effective self-management;
- learning to learn and developing an appetite for learning;
- self awareness, openness and sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues;
- effective performance within a team environment;
- interpersonal skills of effective listening, negotiating, persuasion and presentation; and
- abilities to conduct research into business and management issues.

(QAA Subject benchmark Statements for General Business & Management, 2006)

The QAA Subject benchmark statements envisage two roles for placement learning. One is explicitly stated: as a means of achieving the integration of theory and practice. The second is implicit: the development of skills that are relevant to employability. Both of these roles are relevant to the development of a reflective capacity. The integration of theory and practice involves an evaluation of assumptions underpinning theory and the testing of those assumptions in practice. Skills to be developed include the cognitive skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis. However, they also include the skill of learning to learn, self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Thus the three aspects of a way of knowing are acknowledged: cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal.

4.3 Research findings on the impact of placement learning

There is a relatively small body of research into the impact of placement experience on the learning of students. Such research has investigated three main aspects of placement. Firstly, there have been a range of studies over the last two decades on how placement prepares students for, and makes them more effective in, the workplace after graduation. These studies have tended to focus upon skills development and enhancement (Bowes and Harvey, 1999; Bourner and Ellerker, 1993,a,b; Harvey et al, 1997; Mason et al, 2003). However, these studies have not addressed the holistic issue of the way in which such skills may support the development of a reflective capacity.

More recently, there have been studies into the relationship between placement and subsequent academic performance. There is now a growing body of evidence that suggests there is a positive relationship between placement and academic performance. Gomez et al (2004) investigated the link between placement and academic performance for bioscience students over
a two-year period. They found that, on average, placement students gain an advantage of nearly 4 percentage points in their final year performance. Since the final year contributed 75 per cent towards the final degree classification the impact of this may be that placement students may benefit by crossing the threshold into a higher degree class. Moreover, their results also indicated that there was a significant positive effect of the placement regardless of initial academic ability.

Mandilaras (2004) similarly conducted an enquiry into the role of placement in degree performance, this time over a one-year period, for economics students. He found that participation in placement significantly increased the chances of obtaining an upper-second-class degree by up to 30 per cent. The probability of obtaining a lower second was also lower for a placement student. Rawlings *et al* (2005) conducted a study with information systems students over a four-year period. They also found that placement students benefited from this. Those who scored above 50 per cent at level 2 showed a substantially greater probability of graduating with a first class or second class (upper division) honours degree than non-placement students.

Finally, Surridge (2007) investigated the comparative performance of placement and non-placement students over a three-year period within an accounting degree. He found that placement students with an average level 2 mark of less than 70 per cent benefited compared with non-placement students with a similar average level 2 mark. There was also a gender effect with female students benefiting more than males. Placement was found to have a significant positive effect on final year marks. For example, placement students gained an advantage of nearly 4 percentage points in comparison with non-placement students. As with the Gomez *et al* (2004) study, final year marks in that institution had a 75 per cent weighting in determining degree class. Hence placement can have a major impact, allowing students to cross the threshold to a higher degree class.

Although there is now a growing body of evidence that the academic performance of students may be enhanced by the undertaking of a placement, there is little evidence to indicate why this might be so. Little and Harvey (2006) conducted a study to investigate students’ perceptions of learning from placements and the extent to which student try to transfer and build on such learning in subsequent stages of the taught curriculum. It involved single interviews with 82 students from seven higher education institutions over six subject areas (including business). They found that personal development was a major element of the placement experience. Such personal development embraced increased confidence, development of interpersonal and organisational skills.

However, in the interviews, students placed less emphasis on intellectual skills development. There was little indication that students had developed their academic abilities of analysis, critique and synthesis and she found a ‘seeming lack of articulation of intellectual development’ (Little and Harvey, 2006, p.61). Notwithstanding this, they found that the overwhelming majority of students related positive changes in their approaches to study as a result of their placement experiences. Such positive changes arose from confidence, an increased motivation to study and a more active engagement with learning tasks. This ‘included a better personal sense of the subject matter, or of a wider reading around a topic, or a greater readiness to question and critique taught material. In this way, students were now more likely to ‘own’ the learning rather than ‘just’ accept it.’ (Ibid. p.61).

Motivation will be a central issue in terms of whether students ‘own’ their learning. Yet this is not an issue that has been much addressed within the placement or the ways of knowing
literature. Bendixen and Rule (2004) sought to develop a holistic understanding of beliefs about knowledge and, in so doing, they considered the role of relevance in conditions for the change of beliefs. Personal relevance includes having a stake in the outcome, an interest in the topic, emotional involvement and/or high self-efficacy.

To conclude, there is a range of evidence to support the role of placement in developing and enhancing skills and making students more employable. There is also a growing body of evidence that demonstrates a relationship between the experience of placement and improved academic performance. However, there is relatively little evidence about the ways in which placement might affect subsequent academic development.

5. Research methodology and method

Research on students’ ways of knowing is concerned with how students make meaning of their experience and how this is related to how they view their learning. This requires a careful listening to what students have to say about their experience and involves a suspension of judgment in order to empathise with, and subsequently describe, that experience. The aim is to allow the student’s own frame of reference to emerge. This research therefore falls into the naturalistic area of inquiry and implies a certain type of research method: the semi-structured extended interview.

Such an interview usually lasts approximately an hour and provides a relaxed context within which students can talk about their experience, and provides an opportunity for the interviewer to prompt for elaborations and explanations. It is worth stressing what is meant by the term ‘experience’ in this context. Boud et al. 1993 (p.6) define it as ‘a meaningful encounter. It is not just an observation, a passive undergoing of something, but an active engagement with the environment, of which the learner is an important part’. Sometimes a question may elicit a short, unengaged response, and further probing or prompts may be required before the interview alights upon something that appears to be meaningful for the student.

The semi-structured interview presents somewhat of a paradox. It is essential that there is a free flow that allows the student to talk about meaningful aspects of their learning. However, this requires a form of careful planning on the part of the interviewer. It will not be possible to predict a student’s responses and therefore the interview becomes an act of improvisation. As Wengraf (2001, p.5) observes, semi-structured interviews are much more demanding than structured interviews and ‘to be successful require

- as much preparation before the session, probably and certainly
- more discipline and more creativity in the session, and certainly
- more time for analysis and interpretation after the session’

Preparation involved the development of a list of prompts to provide a shape and focus to the interview. These were derived from the interview protocol developed by Baxter Magolda (1992, p. 411f) within her own research. This protocol was amended in minor ways to allow for differences in terminology and context. It consists of a series of main questions followed by possible prompts (see Appendix 1). The protocol was organized so that students have the opportunity to talk about the range of domains to which ways of knowing might relate (set out
above in Table 2) the role of the learner, peers, lecturer, assessment and the nature of knowledge. There was also a focus on what might be termed ‘critical incidents’ such as key decisions, significant experiences or encounters, moments of surprise or shock that might lead to changes in ways of knowing.

Each interview was preceded by a statement of context, indicating that the student should feel free to talk about any experiences or ideas that came to mind. This was to ensure that students felt free to talk broadly about their experience. It was also preceded with a reassurance as to confidentiality. All interviews started with the first main question, but thereafter the interview was shaped by each student’s response. Thus the order in which main questions were asked varied. In most interviews it was possible to introduce the main questions in a natural way as they became relevant to what the student was talking about.

Creativity was required during the interview. During the first interview with each student it became apparent that it was not as easy to identify their beliefs about knowledge as we had anticipated. Students were also not as ‘reflective’ as we had anticipated. Consequently, additional probing and exploratory questions were asked within each interview in an attempt to identify further aspects of the student’s frame of reference. Although this study was initially designed to investigate epistemological beliefs in the context of ways of knowing, our initial experience within the interviews highlighted that other facets of ways of knowing might need to be investigated. In addition, we could see how important it was to identify a students’ frame of reference as a way of setting on one side our own presuppositions about what we might find. Consequently in the follow-up interviews, we continued to use the prompt list but we were careful to ensure that students were given a full opportunity to talk about their experience.

Analysis and interpretation took place as a part of the planning for the second interview with each student, including a review of the prompt list, but also a careful, empathetic reading of the first interview. This was not only to re-acquaint ourselves with the student, but also to carry out an initial review of what might comprise the student’s frame of reference. A balance had to be sought, at this point, between a useful awareness of what was meaningful to the student and the bringing of an open mind to new experiences that would be described within the second interview.

The stages involved in data collection and analysis are set out in Figure 2 and each of the stages is discussed in turn.
Figure 2  Stages in the design and conduct of the research study

Note: there is reference back to the interview transcripts at all stages.
Stage 1 - Selection of interview participants

The aim of the study was to identify a range of experiences and conceptions so that similarities and differences could be fully explored. At the design stage of the project it was decided to interview 10 students who were currently on placement and five students who had returned from placement and had commenced their final year of study. The placement students were to be interviewed twice during the year: once shortly after they had started their placement and again towards the end of their placement. The final year students were to be interviewed once approximately two months after they had started their final year of study.

Within research studies of this nature a pragmatic approach is taken and 15 to 20 interviewees usually form the basis of enquiry. One factor to be considered is the number and length of interview transcripts involved and the amount of data that a researcher can practically handle, especially where an immersion in the student experience is required. A second factor is whether, within the interviews, it is felt that sufficient variation and experience has been accessed. ‘Saturation’ and ‘sufficiency’ are the terms used to describe the latter issue. In other words is there a sufficient element of repetition or re-occurrence of themes and perceptions such that it is felt that further interviews are unlikely to introduce any new elements (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Additional students were recruited at the start of the project to allow for withdrawals from the study. However, only one student requested to leave the project once it had started. Thus, in the event 11 placement students, 8 BA (Hons) Business Studies (BABS) and 3 BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance (BAAF) were interviewed twice during the year and 6 final year students were interviewed. In fact, 4 of the final year students were also interviewed towards the end of the final year. Thus a total of 32 interviews were conducted.

In selecting students for the project the following factors were considered: level 2 average mark, gender and type of placement organization. Prior research on ways of knowing clearly shows that gender may indicate distinctive variation. We felt it prudent to include a range of academic abilities (as evidenced by level 2 average mark) and type of placement organization (on the assumption that this would provide a range of placement experience). However, given that this is an exploratory study, we did not wish to make any further assumptions about possible factors that might be related to variation in ways of knowing.

Our final choice of students was influenced by several factors. We chose a particular region for the placement location to minimize travel time. We then selected students working in that region across a range of different types of employment, selecting them to provide a range of level 2 average marks and roughly equal numbers of male and female students. Table 3 sets out the names of students, their degree course, the degree class equivalent of their level 2 achievement and the nature of the placement employment.

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7 The names, but not gender, of students have been changed to ensure anonymity.
**Table 3  Students participating in the project**

**Stage 2 – Individual interviews**

We have described above the design of the interview protocol. Interviews were conducted twice during the placement and the final year (although one final year student declined to attend the second interview). A few interviews took place at the students’ place of work. However, most interviews took place at the university. At the beginning of the interview, issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed. The design and conduct of the research project (including information and consent forms for participants) had been submitted to the University’s Research Ethics Committee and approved.

We found that it was possible to conduct the interviews in an informal way. Doubtless the students were ‘talking to a researcher’ but we found that, as the interview progressed, most
students became fairly relaxed. The second interviews were understandably even less formal as we were already familiar to the students.

**Stage 3 – Interview transcription and proof-reading**

Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by a research assistant. Transcription involved the recording of all conversation with punctuation used to support emphasis. Pauses beyond what was felt to be the norm were noted but not timed. Exclamation marks were also used to denote meaning and laughter was indicated. All transcripts were proof-read. This served two functions. Firstly, it ensured the accuracy of the transcripts (and it is not uncommon for minor errors or paraphrasings to lead to large misunderstandings). Secondly, proof-reading requires much repeated listening and one feels quite familiar with the interview by the time the transcript has been checked.

**Stages 4 & 5 – Analysis of the interviews**

As discussed above, following the conduct of the first interviews, transcripts were read to support and inform the conduct of the second interview. Once the interviews were completed, a further analysis of individual interviews was carried out. This involved a careful and close reading of the transcript and involved a continuous cycle of reduction and interpretation. Initially we focussed on the identification of a frame of reference for each student. This we term the 'student profile' (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000). It comprises the most salient aspects of their experience: themes that recurred throughout the interview. Later in the analysis there is a move away from the experience of the individual to a focus on comparative experiences through the pooling and comparison of quotations. Generalisations across individuals are necessary but it is important that the individual’s unique experience is not lost. An awareness of the student profile is a necessary counter-weight to any meaning being taken out of context.

It should also be noted that these profiles also provide evidence of what might be termed ‘internal validity’. This term is used to refer to the consistency in the account given by the student. The key criterion for judging an interview is the extent to which it gives one access to experience (meaningful events and interpretations). Several factors might hinder this. For example, the lack of any intention to reflect on the part of the student, inappropriate interview questions that close down certain areas of experience and a lack of trust between the interviewer and student. We did not find any worrying inconsistencies within the interviews. However, for many students, we found a coherence in the student’s account that was quite striking and indicated a clear and consistent frame of reference.

Following the identification of the student profile, a series of broad headings were identified under which relevant quotations could be grouped (using data analysis software). The intention, at this stage, was to keep these as fairly broad headings so that analysis was not closed down too early. It was then possible to analyse quotations under each heading to carry out analysis across the group of students and for each student individually.

**Stage 6 – Production of student profiles and the identification of themes**
As a final stage in the analysis, following a reiteration of analysis through broad headings, student profiles and narrower headings, it was possible to produce final student profiles and to identify key themes. The identification of themes involved several different, but iterative, elements. A key standpoint from which the analysis was viewed was looking for differences and similarities. The point of interest was in what constituted distinctive ways of experiencing university, learning and the placement. The themes did not arise solely from what the students said; they also arose from the way that they said things e.g. a lack of conviction, contradictions in what they said or from what they did not say.

At this stage our analysis was also informed by our wider reading of the literature. We would emphasise that the research, whilst formulated in the context of the literature on ways of knowing, was itself formative. Thus we were not wedded to the ways of knowing framework and the research design itself was sufficiently open for a range of student experience to be accessed. In fact, some of our findings were unexpected and challenged prior research. Thus we widened our reading and found that our analysis was supported by a willingness to take a wider view of the nature of learning and learning environments.

6. Research Context

Research into ways of knowing is framed within a social constructivist perspective. That is, it is based on an assumption that meanings and understandings arise from social encounters within particular social contexts. Thus findings from this research project only have value to the extent that they are related to the context which gives rise to them. Baxter Magolda (1992, p. 191) accepts that ways of knowing are ‘working hypotheses’ and that ‘transferability is possible only when the researcher describes the context that produced the working hypotheses sufficiently for readers to judge its similarity to the context in which they wish to use the information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985)’.

Given the wide range of overlapping findings within research on beliefs about knowledge (Hofer, 2004a), it is reasonable to assume that the broad findings of Baxter Magolda’s work would be applicable within a UK university in 2005-07. However, Baxter Magolda’s work was carried out in the context of the University of Miami in the USA from the late 1980s onwards. Her students were of traditional age, mostly white, middle-class families and they ‘experienced college in a student culture characterized by high involvement, academic focus, and tradition.’ (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p.190). The context for our research was rather different. Accordingly, we provide below a full description of the key features of that context below. Further detail under each of these headings is available in Appendix 6.

6.1 Key features of the undergraduate programmes

This strand of the project was conducted within the BA (Hons) Business Studies (BABS) and the BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance (BAAF) modular programmes at a UK university. The Business School within which these programmes are based comprises a community of more than 3,000 students and 150 staff. In its most recent review the Higher Education Council for England rated the teaching as ‘excellent’. This rating was reconfirmed following a detailed inspection by the QAA which awarded the Business School 23 points out of a maximum of 24.
• students have to study and pass the equivalent of six 20-credit modules each year in order to progress from Level 1 through to Level 3.
• BABS is a general business and management programme with an average of approximately 400 students at each level
• BAAF is a specialist accounting programme with an average of approximately 150 students at each level.
• whilst there has been an increasing proportion of overseas student studying on these programmes in recent years, such students do not usually opt for a placement year.

Learning, teaching and assessment

• each module in these two programmes is delivered via the equivalent of at least one ‘large group’ lecture (up to 250 students) and one ‘small group’ tutorial or workshop per week (up to 25 students)
• through the use of teaching and learning approaches (such as case studies, visiting speakers, reflective learning journals, research projects), both the BABS and BAAF programmes seek to highlight and link the theories and concepts encountered in the classroom with real-life practices in the business environment.
• this is integrated with a variety of formative and summative modes of assessment which include in-course assignments (e.g. analysis of case studies, production of management and consultancy reports, individual and group presentations) as well as time-constrained interim tests and year end examinations.

The work-based placement and final year project

Both the BABS and BAAF programmes offer students the opportunity to undertake a work-based placement after completing their second year of study (Level 2), normally commencing between June and October that year. The design and assessment of the placement comply with QAA requirements and the general objectives of the placement year are summarised as follows:

• to provide the student with a period of approved work experience in a host organization approved by the University;
• to develop students’ business skills and knowledge in their chosen vocational areas;
• to allow students to reflect on and apply theoretical knowledge gained from their award;
• to develop students’ key skills;
• to allow students to explore career options;
• to enhance students’ graduate employability; and
• to provide an opportunity to undertake some business research.

8 There are potentially four years to these degrees. Level 1 and level 2 relate to years 1 and 2. A placement year comprises year 3. Level 3 refers to the final year, which may be year 3 for non-placement students and year 4 for placement students.
9 Placement is a compulsory component of the BABS degree. However, those students who choose not to go on a placement can transfer to a BA (Hons) Business Administration degree at the end of their second year.
BABS placement students are required to formulate a research project, the Independent Study Project (ISP), based on the placement. Data for this Independent Study Project (ISP) is gathered and compiled whilst students are undertaking their placement. On returning to their final year of study, the students are required to analyse the data for incorporation into their final year double-weighted ISP dissertation. BAAF placement students are not required to complete an ISP. Instead, all final year BAAF students undertake an accounting or finance-related research project of their choice for the double-weighted ‘Accounting in Context’ (AiC) module. The AiC module places an emphasis on the critical evaluation of information and its sources and on reflective practice. Students are also expected to maintain a learning journal to support the production of an assessed reflective report

Placement students are required to complete a Placement Portfolio. This comprises a range of activities, some of which involve the students’ manager at the placement organisation, whilst others are based on students’ self-assessment and reflection on their learning throughout the placement. Staff in the university’s Placements Office are in regular e-mail and telephone contact with students whilst they are on placement. With the students’ agreement, staff will also visit the students and their managers during the placement.

7. Findings

7.1 Identification of ways of knowing

A way of knowing acts as a lens through which aspects of the learning environment are viewed. Thus within interviews a way of knowing might be evidenced through the way in which students’ talked about themselves, the subjects being studied, their peers, their lecturers and assessment. Baxter Magolda (1992) identifies four qualitative different ways of knowing:

- **absolute knowing**: knowledge exists in an absolute form - it is either right or wrong;
- **transitional knowing**: knowledge is certain in some areas and uncertain in other areas;
- **independent knowing**: knowledge is uncertain - everyone has their own beliefs; and
- **contextual knowing**: knowledge is contextual - one exercises judgement on the basis of evidence in context.

In this section we provide an overview of how the ways of knowing identified by Baxter Magolda were manifested within the interviews.

7.1.1 Absolute way of knowing

The core assumption underpinning this way of knowing is that knowledge exists in an absolute form. Applying this core assumption to the domains of learner, peers, lecturer, assessment and the nature of knowledge, the following assumptions underpin students’ perceptions of the learning environment (Baxter Magolda,1992, p.74):

- knowledge exists in an absolute form;
- learners focus on obtaining information;
- lecturers should communicate information clearly and ensure that students understand the knowledge;
• peers don’t have legitimate knowledge, although they can share what they have learned from authority figures;
• lecturers should determine whether students have acquired the necessary information and assessment is seen as a vehicle to show the lecturer what was learned;
• lecturers can do this because they have mastery of the knowledge and authority; and
• students interpret any discrepancies that they encounter in the learning process as variations in explanations rather than true differences.

Knowledge exists in an absolute form

When describing their learning, students distinguished between the perceived nature of the subjects they studied. Their comments indicated that they do not regard all subjects in the same light. A frequent comparison that occurred was that between accounting and other subjects. For example, Paul sees finance in an absolute sense:

‘Where it’s something like Finance and there’s a technical method which is textbook, you don’t get different views, you just get people who don’t understand it and people that do.’ (Paul 1P: 327)

Leo found it difficult to respond to a question about varying points of view:

‘Um, I don’t really know to be honest with you. I don’t think so. I mean … um … (pause) … varying points of view? I mean to be honest … I mean I see accountancy as being quite a kind of learnt subject so there’s not a lot of … wrong ways of thinking, but I mean learning the concepts and stuff … there’s not a lot of …’ (Leo 1F: 151)

None of the students took a view of knowledge that was completely absolute. Both BABS and BAAF students are exposed to a range of subjects within the degree programmes. Inevitably this allowed them to compare subjects and to become aware that they varied in the extent to which they were underpinned by absolute knowledge. This focus on finance and accounting as comprising absolute knowledge is likely to be of concern (but not a surprise) to accounting lecturers. The identification of assumptions, conventions and the regulatory framework which underpin accounting feature strongly throughout the accounting curriculum.

Learners focus on obtaining information

If knowledge is absolute then learning is explained in terms of acquiring new information and being able to recall it:

‘Learning? Um, I guess … um, I guess (pause) … learning … getting to know something when you don’t know … how can I word it? Um, it’s about new stuff almost I think. With me it’s new stuff. Learning new stuff … getting it in your head and keeping it in your head – a lot of it. Once you can recall it easily then you’ve learnt it.’ (Joe 1P: 187)

Given this assumption, the role of the learner becomes a standard process, generally regardless of subject, of obtaining, assimilating and then understanding this information.

‘Understanding’ in this sense does not refer to a grasp of underlying principles, or of being able to relate the topics to real-life. Learning, as expressed by one of the students, is primarily about organisation: the organisation of information, its access and retrieval. In many of the interviews students vividly described, and with great fluency, just how they went about ‘learning’ in this
sense. This fluency contrasted with their faltering responses when asked about varying points of view or conflicts about what to believe.

Lecturers should communicate information clearly and ensure that students understand the knowledge

If learning is about the assimilation of knowledge then the role of the lecturer is to communicate information clearly. Since the transmission of information can be quite passive students valued lecturers who taught with enthusiasm and passion, maintained their attention, focused on key aspects of the topic and provided good explanations. As Colleen describes, a helpful lecturer is:

‘enthusiastic about their subject and if they give you a lot of useful information that you can actually use and you write it down, then I think it can explain something instead of having to read it in the text book which you may not always understand, so it’s… there are some very good lecturers which you learn a lot from. So when you say that they can give you useful information, what is that useful for? Um, exams … you know, the whole … assignments, exams, all your assessments, that’s what you’re going in for (laugh)… to be able to complete them.’(Colleen 1F:316 )

Peers don’t have legitimate knowledge, although they can share what they have learned from authority figures

The role of peers can be various within this way of knowing. For some students peers ask the questions that they don’t find they can ask themselves – they become the ‘voice’ that the student does not have the confidence to ask:

‘you always get one pupil in a class who’s quite outspoken and the thing is I think you need them as well because sometimes there’s a niggling doubt in your head or something like that and they’ll just say it and even though you’re quite sure that the answer’s quite obvious, sometimes it’s just nice to have a little bit of clarity in the subject. So they ask the questions for you? They ask the questions for me. Yes.’(Joe 1P:102)

It is interesting to note the use of the term ‘pupil’ in the above interview. It was not unusual for students to use ‘classroom’ rather than ‘university’ terminology, thus reinforcing the feeling that they see themselves in a teacher-pupil, rather than a lecturer-student or more adult, relationship.

Several students referred to the issue of ‘confidence’ in asking questions. Within an absolute way of knowing, confidence would be especially important. Firstly, if one views knowledge as factual and certain, then asking a question opens up the possibility of being ‘wrong’. It also opens up the possibility of being seen to challenge the lecturer who is a person of authority. So, all in all, this would be a risky venture for some students10. Working with peers also provides a quick access to explanations and advice rather than ‘having to wait for the tutor all the time’ (Wayne 1P: 89).

10 Baxter Magolda (1992) identified gender-related patterns in ways of knowing. Within the absolute way of knowing, she identified students exhibiting receiving patterns and mastery patterns of knowing which were gender-related. Speaking up in class would be a challenge for a receiving-pattern student whereas a mastery-pattern student would ‘embrace a public role in class to demonstrate their interest to a lecturer, expect interchanges with lecturers, view peers as partners in arguing and quizzing each other to master material, value evaluation that helps them improve their mastery and appeal to authority to resolve differences in knowledge claims.’ (p.38).
Students referred to discussion and debate with their peers and the value that they attached to this. However, this appears to be aimed, not at developing a deeper or critical understanding of topics, but at maintaining attention for the purpose of assimilating and recalling information. For example, as Rudy explains:

‘Well we had….., we could add to each other’s argument and then as you can see… and then once you’ve built an argument up with each other, you can recollect it and then write it down in an exam paper, so it helps a lot’ (Rudy 1P:113)

**Lecturers should determine whether students have acquired the necessary information and assessment is seen as a vehicle to show the lecturer what was learned**

Baxter Magolda sets out a separate heading for the role of assessment and students’ views on this. However, we found that there was generally little discussion of the role of assessment by students. It appears to be taken-for-granted. When referred to, students talked about only their expectations of fairness in marking and clarity about assessment requirements. They also talked about what they were learning, in terms of how they would deal with the material or topic in relation to assessment. Thus theories might be described in absolute terms, not as something to be understood or evaluated in context, but in terms of how they form a way of being assessed. Thus Emily’s response to a question about how she forms her own beliefs is interesting:

‘looking at those theories that you’ve got in HR, did you find that they were competing or conflicting or that you had difficulty deciding which ones to believe? Some of them are quite conflicting anyway aren’t they because if you’re writing an essay you’ve got to argue two points haven’t you?’ (Emily 1P: 75)

**Lecturers can do this because they have mastery of the knowledge and authority**

If students are to think for themselves and develop a ‘voice’ then they will, at some point, have to challenge their own perceptions that lecturers are an unchallengable authority. Yet Holly does not see herself in this role yet. When asked how she came to form views about conflicting theories:

‘I mean I kind of … what I was taught in lectures I kind of took as gospel (laugh).Who am I to raise any conflicting views about that?’ (Holly 1P:282)

Similarly, Joanne comments:

‘Um, well unless it’s fact … which a lot of the time it is, that’s why they’re teaching it, um, you can’t really dispute it, um, so you’re not made to believe it, but you have to believe it because it’s fact.’ (Joanne 1P:323)

Views about the importance of assessment can be linked to this. For example, Paul, comments:

‘No, you just take it, don’t you? You’re being taught it as a subject and actually, X, my friend, gets particularly agitated about, is, you know, well, that’s what they say, if you don’t believe that, you won’t get marks in the exam which, at the end of the day, is how you’re going to get your degree, so you just go along with it. I think… yeah…. that is probably my view as well, is that, even if you did think, ‘Gosh, I really don’t, you know, I really don’t think that actually, but you… I don’t think you have the liberty to sometimes express that necessarily because you
won’t get the marks for it. So you end up just having to say, ‘OK, you know, that’s what it’s like. This is the model. This is what such and such said, and this is how it is.’ (Paul 1P: 453)

**Students interpret any discrepancies that they encounter in the learning process as variations in explanations rather than true differences**

Within the interviews students were asked if they came across conflicting theories or views. Most frequently they would respond by talking either about whether a consistent message was delivered by lecturers or about a lack of consistency in explanations either between lecturers or between the lecturer and the textbook. For example, Spencer, responds:

‘In terms of the opinions that I was given by lecturers, I think they followed a pretty consistent theme. [ ] I think I was given a fairly consistent message by my tutors and lecturers.’ (Spencer 1P: 307)

Many follow-up probes were used within the interviews to encourage students to talk about the nature of conflicting views, discrepancies, differences of opinion and so on. However, we found that either such questions did not have much meaning for students or they talked about a lack of consistency or different ways of explaining the same thing. This is in accord with the absolute way of knowing. Where there is an assumption that knowledge is certain then students will interpret differences of opinion between authorities as differences, not about the facts, but about detail arising from inappropriate application, misinformation or misunderstanding.

### 7.1.2 Transitional ways of knowing

With a transitional way of knowing there is a shift from the assumption that knowledge is absolute. Here there are two categories of knowledge: certain in some areas and uncertain in others. Where knowledge is uncertain it is assumed that, in due course, better evidence, techniques or theories will produce accepted facts. Applying this assumption about knowledge to the domains of learner, peers, lecturer and assessment, Baxter Magolda (1992, p.105) provides the following overview of a transitional way of knowing:

- two categories of knowledge: certain and uncertain;
- students alter their focus from acquiring to understanding (which includes applying knowledge within class and to life in general);
- peers take on a more active role to support exploration:
  - Support the discovery of voice: (p.122) access to one’s own and others’ personal experiences (using personal judgment, deciding for themselves or thinking original thoughts)
  - But there is still a reliance on authority
- assessment is appropriate to the extent that it measured students’ comprehension of the material.

**Two categories of knowledge: certain and uncertain**

Most students appeared to provide evidence of a transitional way of knowing. Joe provides a good example of the reasoning involved in this view of knowledge when he talks about different views about the legal liability of auditors:
‘Why do you think people have different views? Um, I don’t know. Because there’s no clear-cut answer almost. [ ] There is, there’s just no obvious … there’s going to be a right answer in the end. Is there? I probably think so, but it’s hard … at this stage it’s hard to see what the right answer is, and that’s why there’s so much conflict I think [ ] only when you’ve got all the information you can make the best … decision … decision, yes and I don’t know … I don’t know what the answer is’ (Joe 1P: 247)

Transitional knowing was also evidenced when students distinguished between the subjects they studied. As described previously, accounting tended to be given as an example of a straightforward, factual subject. In contrast, other subjects gave rise to different types of uncertainties. Rachel’s description of her experience of business law contains several interesting aspects:

‘I know in business law it was very on your own, the work, and that was often quite hard because, you know, what you’re learning and putting all the cases together and the sequence of events, it was often kind of quite hard … you know, you were very focused on one way of doing it, someone else had another way of doing it and another person had another way, but you couldn’t feed off that and, you know, it was your way of thinking didn’t quite meet theirs, so you couldn’t really …’ (Rachel 1P: 83)

Rachel, used to working with peers on accounting problems, is struck by differences in ways of thinking within business law. Within a transitional way of knowing, since there will be different interpretations and uncertainty in the face of a lack of information and facts, then it follows that, in the absence of a right answer, there will be an emphasis on a process that allows a student to use the information available:

‘It was … some people interpreted the question a different way and, you know, the scenario. So they said ‘Oh well, that means that’, but then somebody else would say ‘Well actually no, if you read it all together and put that bit with it, it’s something different’. If you do one thing slightly different it leads onto a different scenario to different scenario so … Is one way wrong then because there’s only one way of interpreting the scenario?: I think there was, you know, I think they kind of got process marks maybe I’m not sure, but it was very … quite low marks and quite high marks and there was quite a gap between them.’ (Rachel 1P: 87)

It is interesting to note that Rachel refers to assessment and marks within this discussion. It seems that coming to a view is, again, influenced by assessment rather than an attribute of the development of a way of knowing.

Joanne also refers to this notion of a process that is undergone in coming to an end result. She refers to the existence of ‘facts’, and in response to the question ‘are there any non-facts?’:

‘Well [human resource management] is obviously one because it’s open for discussion, um, um, in … to a certain extent, um, and [operations] was another one whereby there was a … for instance if you were doing course work, you know, you had to get to an end result, um, but there were so many things you could put before that and to get to that and you could do that in your own way, so um, I think that’s it … I mean finance that’s fact (laugh), um … (Joanne 1P: 327)

It is evident that Joanne has not thought much about the differences between subjects. Within transitional knowing there is no sense that the student has to make a personal decision or to come to a personal view – the process is the object.
If a decision is taken, ‘what would work out best’ can be substituted for the absolute knowledge that learners found did not exist. Thus Kirsty talked about the complexity of a public sector organisation and how activity-based costing would be the ‘best method’ and ‘the simplest way’ (Kirsty 2F:390).

This growing recognition of uncertainty and of the existence of conflicting opinions in areas of uncertainty is summed up by Robin:

‘at the end of the year (second year) with your exam and you’re thinking ‘right, this is correct’, but then go onto the third year and then say ‘Well it is correct, but there’s a lot more views’. (Robin 1F: 307)

Robin is still using the term ‘correct’ but doesn’t expand on what the views might be about. When he is asked how he decides on his view, he responds: ‘Um, the one that I find easiest, that’s what it comes down to.’ (Robin 1F: 319).

Students alter their focus from acquiring to understanding (which includes applying knowledge within class and to life in general)

When faced with differing interpretations leading to differing views, students have to draw on something other than facts in order to ‘make sense’ of this situation. This can be achieved through relating what is learnt to ‘real-life’. Four students (Wayne, Holly, Luke and Robin) talked about learning in this way. The need to relate what is learnt to a practical situation is illustrated in Wayne’s comments on why he prefers management accounting to financial accounting:

‘I really enjoy management accounting because it’s a bit more, um, … I kind of understand it more, it’s more, um, a sense of … like if you’re doing costing or doing those sort of things, you can kind of think about them in your head and understand where it’s coming from, why you would be doing that and sort of put a real life example to it’ (Wayne 1P: 57)

Wayne’s emphasis on real-life applicability then leads to a particular ‘role’ for theory within a transitional way of knowing:

‘… there was a five stage Porter model, um, I really can’t remember, I think it’s speed, cost, dependability and a couple of other things that I can’t remember off the top of my head, um, and maybe the way they looked at them I didn’t particularly agree with, like, um, they kind of put the five theories into, um, different work environments so you could have a supermarket or something and they would say that, kind of, speed was very important … speed was very important and it was important for, say, a supermarket to get the customers as fast as they can through the tills, but then from my personal experience because I’ve worked in a supermarket, customers don’t like to be rushed [ … ] so I didn’t always agree with the theories or … it seemed more of a theory than something that had actually been carried out in every day life. So that was the only thing that I might have argued with. So you didn’t feel you had to believe it, it was just an idea and ... why do you think we have these theories then really, because that doesn’t seem to relate to real life? Um, maybe as a guideline I suppose. Not everyone gets hands on life experiences, so the theories kind of give you a guideline as to what is right and wrong.’ (Wayne 1P:261)
Thus theory acts as a guideline (or authority) until personal experience can allow one to develop own’s own views on theories. But in this case, there is still a reference to something being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

**Peers take on a more active role to support exploration**

Since the personal experience of students may vary, peers now become important in the sense that they can support the discovery of voice: giving access to one’s own and others’ personal experiences (using personal judgment, deciding for themselves or thinking original thoughts). However, Joanne describes this in a rather low-key way, when asked if she found it useful to work with fellow students:

> ‘Yes, very much so. Yeah, different ideas on, you know … different opinions in a lot of circumstances actually, um, it’s just quite handy to know what other people think and how … you know, what they think on a certain subject or theory, so yes it was handy.’ (Joanne 1P:127)

Similarly, Tony finds that:

> ‘helps me to think, sort of a little bit outside of the box, think objectively, give me sort of a wider opinion of things so that I’m not just, not just narrow but, I mean, it does help in my course…. I don’t know, it’s different for me …… it does help a bit. It’s difficult to say how though.’ (Tony 1P: 179,)

These extracts suggest a lack of close engagement with the experience of others. This was evident for most students.

**Assessment is appropriate to the extent that it measured students’ comprehension of the material**

As with the absolute way of knowing, we found that there was generally little discussion of the role of assessment by students. It appears to be taken-for-granted. When referred to, students talked about their expectations of fairness in marking and clarity about assessment requirements.

**7.1.3 Independent way of knowing**

As indicated in the previous section, transitional knowing is characterised by two categories of knowledge: certain and uncertain. However, within independent knowing there is a basic assumption of uncertainty. Applying this core assumption to the domains of learner, peers, lecturer, assessment and the nature of knowledge, the following assumptions underpin students’ perceptions of the learning environment, Baxter Magolda (1992, p.136) provides the following overview of an independent way of knowing:

- openness capture the essence of the core assumption:
  - belief that knowledge was open to many interpretations
  - that people should be receptive to others’ ideas
  - many possibilities existed in the choices confronting them
  - the risk of being wrong is eliminated
differences among authorities now represent the variety of views possible in an uncertain world;
authorities are not the only source of knowledge - students view themselves as equals and hold their own opinions as valid;
peers become a legitimate source of knowledge rather than being a part of the learning process;
independent knowers emphasize being open-minded and allowing everyone to believe what they will; and
although independent knowers did make decisions about what to believe, they rarely identified criteria upon which these should be based (thus using their voices to minimum risk).

Initially, many students appeared to fall into this way of knowing, mainly through having characteristics of the last feature in the above list. This arose particularly because they would talk about varying interpretations and about listening to the ideas of others. Moreover, a notable characteristic within the interviews was the rationale given by students as to how they arrived at their views. Students referred to the following:

- Gut instincts
- Personal feelings
- ‘How you have been raised’

For example, Rudy refers to all of these:

‘Obviously you use the evidence…. If I was doing an essay or something, or if I was writing an answer in an exam, yeah I’d use evidence to back my argument up or to back the argument up against me, but then, I suppose gut instincts or your personal feelings is going to have an impact on that and that’s….I don’t know how, why my opinion is a certain way, but everybody’s opinion is different and I suppose maybe it’s something to do with who you are or how you’ve been raised, or whatever, so you can’t rightly know what that is’ (Rudy 1P:137)

Spencer refers to ‘deep felt moral belief’ (Spencer1P:311) but is still open to ‘facts that I wasn’t aware of previously’(1P:327). Chloe talks about ‘what you feel comfortable with’ (Chloe1P: 282), whilst John refers to having ‘more preconceptions than views’, although he adds that his ‘views have been a bit more balanced since University’ but he has ‘always had his own views’ (John1F: 153). However, these criteria are of such a nature that it would appear that there has been no decision about what to believe. These appear literally to be ‘gut reactions’ rather than a conscious decision.

Moreover, it was difficult to find evidence of the core assumptions of uncertainty and openness. This in part arose from a lack of fluency, or inability to talk about these issues. It also appeared that ‘coming to a view’ was an irrelevance in the context of students’ limited time, the importance of assessment processes and the focus on gaining a good degree classification.

Only one student, Robin, appeared to be moving towards an independent way of knowing. It is not possible to provide examples of aspects of an independent way of knowing under all of the above headings. However, Robin provides an example of some element of openness. Robin feels that he has changed over the last two years, and openness is the first thing he mentions:
‘I’m probably more open to, um, the way things happen, whereas before I may have been thinking … um, things happen in one way and maybe now I’ve understood that things can happen differently, um, I just have a bit more open view of life, you know, anything’s possible really. [ ] I’m just more open and willing to do different things, and not be afraid to try things I suppose. Not being afraid of a challenge.’ (Robin 2F:595)

His object of interest lies in deeper questions. The clue to this lies in his reflection about working with people he does not know: ‘with people you don’t know you are always going to have trouble asking them deeper questions.’ (1F:155). He expresses more positive feelings about working with other students (compared with the rather laid-back attitude observed previously within a transitional way of knowing). For him, peers are a legitimate source of knowledge. For example:

‘I mean you just had to say how people reacted, how the organisation reacted, um, if the change implementation went well, if not why not, questions like that really, so not such, you know, theory X says this, and because of that this means its more, um, opinionated really, which is quite good because throughout the tutorials in a year people would … especially tutorials, it’s a lot of group talk and it’s not just one person speaking, everyone gets in together and has their own opinion on different topics and, um, it’s…it’s good.’ (Robin 2F:47)

Robin sees his own opinions as valid – to an extent. He values his own personal experience and distinguishes this from what he terms ‘secondary experience’ i.e. ‘what you’ve read or something you’ve heard about’ (2F:35). However, he appears to have an ambivalent attitude towards his own personal authority. This may arise because of his perception of what is ‘permitted’ by his tutors within the educational context. Thus:

‘even though I have applied what I …my experiences, you’ve got to be in a frame of mind even that your opinions are appreciated, that what the lecturers and tutorial tutors tell you is correct because, um, and then you just have your own perceptions of that teaching, whereas if you start thinking outside of the box too … too far outside of the box then your opinions aren’t really appreciated and you’re told otherwise. (2F:243)

When asked if he does disagree with his tutors, his response indicates their authority is only partial:

‘I may do slightly sometimes, but at the end of the day they’ve had the experience and their modules have been set up the way that is best practice, it’s how it should be, um, so if anything I would maybe argue the situation rather than what they’re telling me. Um,[ ] Yes. I’ll say ‘Oh I don’t think that’s the way they meant it’, or, um, but I wouldn’t totally disagree with what they say because it’s … what’s the point, because you’re arguing with a professional who’s had the experience and I’m just giving an opinion which might be totally incorrect (laugh) or…’ (2F:339)

Robin will argue the situation, i.e. because he has experience and knowledge of context that he values. This would seem to be moving towards a contextual way of knowing. Yet Robin also refers to giving an opinion that might be ‘totally incorrect’. Although he is deliberately disparaging himself in this instance, a sense of some insecurity is evident, as he perceives the tutor as ‘a professional who’s had the experience’. This contrasts with his openness and interest in ‘deeper questions’.
However, Robin is also quite pragmatic in his approach to his assessments, doing what is required to get that all important 2:1 degree classification. Talking about his final year examinations:

‘Um, yes. My (organisational analysis) went really well, um, well I hope. I learnt by doing acronyms of the theories and when I got in the exam I literally wrote down two pages of them all and just referred back to them.’ (2F:15)

Robin’s account highlights interesting aspects. It would seem that he is developing his own voice and views. However, whilst his account provided evidence of openness, we could not identify any underlying acknowledgement about uncertainty. Baxter Magolda (1992, p. 137) points out that students make ‘a discovery that will make independent knowing possible. Whereas knowledge previously was composed of things established as certain or what other people thought was right, it will now consist of what [the students] decide to believe’. She also observes that where students shifted from transitional to independent knowing, there was a recognition that their accounts were revelatory in nature. Students’ accounts might refer to: a crumbling of foundations and the need to rebuild for themselves, scepticism about what ‘truth’ is, that being ‘wrong’ did not necessarily mean that you were a bad person and so on. However, we did not identify any revelatory aspects of experience within the interviews.

Some students did refer to key changes in their attitudes and perspectives. However, the main key change lay in students’ perceptions of themselves and others, rather than in their perceptions of theories and knowledge. Tony provides a good example of this, where he indicates that his placement has:

‘s shown me that my theories … not my personal theories, but theories from university, sometimes don’t necessarily work in, actually in the field, they don’t quite transfer quite correctly. Um, it’s also given me a bit of an insight as to the sort of my learning and organisations and, um, (Pause) it was good. I’ve learnt a lot. I’ve taken a lot of out of it but it’s very difficult to describe what I’ve … it’s changed my perspective on my working life, how I conduct myself at work and the way … it’s changed my expectations of work, um, I don’t know, it’s difficult. It’s difficult to describe.’ (Tony 2P:500)

Changes in perspectives on working life was a major theme across the interviews. However, changes in beliefs about knowledge and theories were less evident. Here we can see that Tony held an assumption that theories should transfer correctly into practice, and this has been challenged by the observation that they ‘don’t quite transfer quite correctly’ This seems to be a move from an absolute to a transitional way of knowing rather than the revelatory change involved in the recognition of continual uncertainty. Thus although Tony is quite forthright in his views on certain matters, he still relies on sources of information which he regards as authoritative, such as the BBC.

7.1.4 Contextual way of knowing

Within an independent way of knowing, students come to a decision about what to believe, and think for themselves. This is also a defining characteristic of a contextual way of knowing. However in the latter, the ‘anything goes’ attitude changes and the individual now considers that some views may be more valid than others based on evidence in context. Baxter Magolda (1992, p.170f) identifies underpinning assumptions in the following areas:
• some ideas are more valid than others;
• evidence is derived from experts (those who have gained expertise in a particular context);
• the exchange and comparison of views is incorporated into the learning process;
• learning is about the evaluation of knowledge claims and the integration of information in order to apply it within a context; and
• lecturers support evaluative discussion and questioning.

We did not find evidence of a contextual way of knowing within the student interviews. We did find that students referred to particular teaching approaches that would be regarded as supportive of a contextual way of knowing – and these were found to be challenging. For example, Paul talks about his experience of organisational analysis:

‘But, um, yes, I have to say I mean, all respect to it (organisational analysis booklet), that is making me think. I initially remember when getting this book and I was just looking through it and I was just…just thought ‘Oh God, more of this rubbish’ and, um, it is making me think. It is making me think.’ (Paul 2P: 516)

7.2 The allocation of students to ways of knowing

A way of knowing is a lens through which a student views the learning environment. However, it is not necessarily appropriate to categorise students as being absolute or transitional knowers, as such. It is assumed that the beliefs on which a way of knowing is based are deeply-held and not easily changed. But they do develop and change. Moreover, they are also assumed to be complex, inter-related and contextual. Thus whilst Baxter Magolda (1992, p.409) allocated students to ways of knowing, it is not assumed that this is a straightforward matter. Her allocation was achieved by identifying a predominant reasoning structure for each domain (learner, peers, lecturer, assessment, nature of knowledge). An overall way of knowing was then identified from the average of domain ratings. This type of a process is necessary in order to establish a sense of patterns of ways of knowing across larger student groups exceeding 100.

We have not allocated students to one way of knowing based on this procedure. As will be discussed further below, we believe that there are contextual features for this study that would make this a potentially misleading allocation. In addition, given the particular context of this research project, we regard this research as exploratory and we necessarily have data from far fewer students. Thus we are not in a position to identify patterns.

We set out, in Table 4, our allocation of students to ways of knowing (A: absolute; T: transitional; I : independent) within each domain.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Role of learner</th>
<th>Role of peers</th>
<th>Role of lecturer</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Nature of knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BAAF placement year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BABS placement year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>T</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudy</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BAAF Final year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
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<td>Leo</td>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T/I</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>T/I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Allocation of students to ways of knowing within each domain

Where there is no allocation this means that there was insufficient data to support an allocation. This arose because, despite some prompting, this domain did not appear to have a particularly significant meaning for the student. For example, Spencer was particularly noted for preferring to work on his own. Although several students said that they preferred to work on their own, they did refer to their interaction with peers, whereas Spencer’s preference to work on his own was more pronounced. However, this is consistent with his background of undertaking a range of jobs, during his gap year and whilst at university, and therefore he is likely to rely more on the interactions outside university. Similarly, John adopted such a highly organized approach to his learning that he possibly did not attach much significance to the role of the lecturer.

The most noticeable aspect of Table 4 is the prevalence of absolute ways of knowing in the domain of the lecturer and the lack of expressed views about the nature of assessment. These are interesting features which we consider arise from the contextual features of the educational environment in which the students study. This will be discussed further in the following section.

7.3 Contextual features of the study

Analysis of the interview data focused on the identification of the four ways of knowing. However, this process of identification was not always easy and it became apparent that contextual issues arising from student motivations within a UK business and accounting degree
programme were significant themes that affected the ways in which ways of knowing were manifested.

Context is a central issue within a research project of this nature. Baxter Magolda (1992, p.191), stresses the social constructivist nature of research into ways of knowing and acknowledges that this raises issues concerning the ‘transferability’ of conclusions. She recognises that the perspectives generated by the University of Miami students cannot be assumed to be applied within other contexts. Thus she asserts that: ‘transferring the insights from the last five chapters to students with different characteristics in different contexts requires taking a step back from ways of knowing and patterns within them to underlying story lines. [ ] By underlying story lines, I mean the threads that run through the collective student stories that are more general than the specific ways of knowing or patterns within them.’

Baxter Magolda’s story lines comprise:

- the development and emergence of voice
  - from repetition of what others say to developing one’s own perspective
- a changing relationship with authority
  - from initial reliance on authority to moving away and developing their own
- evolving relationships with peers
  - an increasing value attributed to peers as knowers in their own right

These story lines are supported by a substantial body of research conducted on epistemological beliefs (Hofer, 2004). As discussed above, we recognised these story lines within our data. However, we also realised that these were affected by themes that appear to arise from the particular contingencies of a UK business and accounting degree programme.

Within the interviews, four aspects of the students’ experiences emerged as being central to the way in which they viewed their university and placement experience. These did not arise as a consequence of direct questions contained within the interview protocols. They either arose, in one form or another, as a natural follow-up question within the interview or students volunteered the information during the course of discussion. Thus we obtained observations about these aspects from most, but not all, students.

These contextual features include:

- extrinsic motivation – a focus on
  - obtaining a business-related qualification
  - a good degree
  - a positive attitude towards placement; and
- a strong focus on the organisation of learning and attention to the requirements of assessment

7.3.1 Extrinsic motivation: a focus on obtaining a business-related qualification

Motive is central to an understanding of the meaning that students attribute to a situation or context. When asked why they had chosen to study for a BABS degree, for 10 out of the 11 BABS students, a prime reason was that it provided a broad business knowledge base and did not close down too soon their options in relation to future career paths.
Only one student was rather more negative about her choice of degree. As Joanne explains:

‘I chose it because I took business studies on because I was thinking of the end result and what I could get with that, um, and I’d also done it at secondary school, I did it as A level. I never liked it, but I carried it on … [ ] It’s because of the theoretical work, I’d rather be hands on.’ (1P:452)

However, even Joanne is thinking of the end result. Six BAAF students were interviewed and their reasons for choosing a BAAF degree provides a contrast with what has just been described for the BABS students. They wanted a good business-related degree which was more specific and more focused. They were also influenced by their intention to pursue a highly regarded professional accountancy qualification after completion of their undergraduate studies.

However, dilemmas arise when deciding between a broad-based degree qualification or a more specialised one. This is summed up by Tony on the one hand:

‘Business Studies is wonderful because it gives me quite a broad range. It’s also crap because it doesn’t specify anywhere, so I sometimes feel slightly wondering between, ‘Maybe I should have picked a slightly more specialisation’, just like maybe more like marketing or finance, than being…. sort of more channelled, but because it gives such a broad overview, I know I can do anything with it, so….’ (1P:23)

And Leo on the other:

‘I mean I really don’t think I’m going to be an accountant, but that’s pretty much my feeling and it is a little bit … it kind of annoys me really … you know, I don’t know if I would do an accounting degree again. [ ]And that’s not taking anything away from the course … I mean the course is obviously … it’s been … it’s an accounting and finance course and that’s what I wanted to do when I left school because, you know, I was always told that if you’ve got a grasp of figures or whatever that can be applied anywhere in a business really. So, you know, and I thought that I wanted to go into business and things like that. I probably still will somewhere, but I don’t know if I’ll be an accountant (laugh).’ (1F: 573)

Of the six BAAF students, five remained committed to the course but had doubts about whether they wished to become professionally qualified accountants after graduation. Most envisaged working in business but possibly taking a wider finance-related role.

7.3.2 The drive to get a ‘good’ degree: a 2:1 classification

An overriding issue for the majority of students regarding their second and final years was the need to get a ‘good’ degree with a consequent strong focus on meeting assessment requirements. Students described increasing engagement in their studies after their first year and a steady sharpening of focus, culminating in an all-out effort in their final year. And the final year is about getting at least a 2:1 degree classification:

‘So I would love to get … I want to get a 2:1, so any higher is a bonus, but I’d have to work very hard I think because there are lots of my subjects that are low … like finance being 50, so [ ]Yes, I’d like to end on a 2:1.’ (Emily 1P: 793)

The need to obtain a ‘good’ degree was a recurring theme in students’ comments during the interviews and this inevitably meant that students were highly attuned to assessment requirements.
7.3.3 A strong focus on the organisation of learning and attention to the requirements of assessment

Students were asked, when thinking about their second year, to describe their most significant learning experience. This set off a train of thought and elaboration, aided by appropriate prompts. We found that students’ responses fell into four broad categories:

- the organisation of learning;
- feelings about learning;
- maintaining attention; and
- the relevance of learning.

The number of responses that fell within each category and sub-category are indicated in brackets. This illustrates, rather mechanistically, what came across quite markedly within the interviews – that the most significant learning experiences generally related to the organisation of learning. This was very much in accord with the focus on getting a good degree and a lesser focus on intrinsic interest in business and accounting, or sub-specialisms within these fields of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broad category</td>
<td>The organisation of learning (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working in groups (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The need to organise and prioritise one’s work (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The value of being compelled to keep up (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working on one’s own (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings about learning (1)</td>
<td>Satisfaction and relief (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining attention (3)</td>
<td>Interesting and enthusiastic lecturer (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of learning (7)</td>
<td>Ability to relate subject to real world (3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Individual subject interest (2)</td>
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<td>Making links to other subjects (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realisation about nature of critical analysis (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Categories of significant learning experiences in Year 2

Students described with great fluency how they went about their learning and this strongly contrasted with their more faltering accounts about what they had studied and how they arrived at a view within particular subjects.
7.3.4 A positive attitude towards placement

Students generally evidenced a highly positive attitude towards placements. Again, there tended to be different reasons why the BABS and BAAF students chose to do a placement. BABS students regarded it as an integral part of the degree and saw it as providing significant added-value. The placement was perceived as offering several benefits:

- experience and an improved CV;
- an opportunity to find out what business is like; and
- to provide a focus in a specialist area which is of interest.

As far as the latter was concerned, the placement provided an opportunity to identify a possible career route. Consequently, BABS students spoke positively about the placement. Even Luke, whose placement did not live up to his expectations, still felt that he would do it again:

‘I found it could have been a bit more honest with what it was going to be, but it was still fine. I’d still do it now. I got, well, because I’ve got it in my CV and I did learn stuff. I did learn about the organisation, the (financial services institution) and things like that.’ (Luke F1: 345)

In the case of the BAAF students, their reasons for choosing to undertake a placement were more varied. Leo wanted to earn money so that he could avoid taking part-time work in his final year. Joe needed to do a placement in order to obtain an additional degree from the overseas institution where he completed his second year studies. The remaining students wanted to achieve a broader experience of business and had not sought accounting or finance-specific placements.

An interesting reflection is that although students had positive attitudes towards placement, it was quite striking that these were attitudes rather than specific expectations or intentions. Students did not talk about the latter. As part of their placement portfolio activities, all students are required to complete an initial audit of current skills and knowledge and a statement of initial objectives. These are reviewed at the mid-point and end of the placement. However, none of the students referred to this exercise within the interviews or talked about how their placement experience helped to achieve those objectives – or any objectives. It would appear that students may be involved in ‘recipe following’ (Boud and Walker, 1998). They use this term to describe the situation where ‘elements of modes of reflection are turned into checklists which students work through in a mechanical fashion without regard to their own uncertainties, questions or meanings’ (p. 192).

Thus there is no sense of ownership in terms of students identifying specific aspects of the placement which they had made their own i.e. intentional self-development. This confirms the findings of Walmsley, Thomas and Jameson (2006). They enquired into incidents of surprise and sense making for 20 tourism placement students. The assumption underlying their study was that surprises and sense making are important elements within both the adjustment process when entering new work environments and as part of the learning experience that placements provide. They found far fewer incidences of surprise and sense-making than they had anticipated, thus calling into question the extent to which the placement was a learning experience. They noted that ‘although participants evidently intended to undertake a placement, there does also appear to have been at least for some a general deficit in terms of so-called intentional self-development (barring the desire to learn or improve new skills).’ (Walmsley et al, 2006, p.366). Thus a
positive attitude to placement appears to be an example of extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, motivation. This is a phenomenon which would benefit from further enquiry.

7.4 The development of a reflective capacity

7.4.1 Placement context: students have take responsibility for their own learning and performance

When students were asked to identify and comment on their most significant learning experience whilst on placement, the majority referred to the need to take responsibility: for their learning and performance. Even where students were not expected to assume a high level of responsibility, students felt they had a responsibility to their co-workers. As placement employees, they felt that they ‘had to deliver’ and this contrasted with their experience at university – as Rachel describes:

‘I think at work you can actually see where it’s going, you know, there is, you know, the outcome will affect something and, you know, whereas at uni it’s kind of you just plod along and if you don’t do it then it’s not a real problem, apart from the assignments, but at work if you don’t do something then it means somebody else can’t do something and this won’t get done and things like that, so … Sometimes I sit there thinking ‘if I don’t do this … if I get this wrong …’, you know, so in that way you do have to approach it slightly differently and different learning ways’. (Rachel 1P: 479)

Although Colleen found it quite daunting to be given the responsibility to deal with unfamiliar tasks and situations, she observes that she learnt a significant amount from such experiences. Like Rudy, she found that the responsibility of rising to the challenge in these situations was also linked to a realisation that how she performed in her role had potential implications for someone else’s full-time job in the organization:

‘I mean it was horrible at first and I thought ‘oh God, I don’t know about that, I’ve only been here for a couple of weeks, I can’t do that’, but you learnt so much … I learnt so much more from being thrown into situations, um, than I would have done if I’d just sat there and … just wasn’t given anything to do. So how did you cope with being thrown in at the deep end? Um, I don’t know, you just had to get on and do it. I mean especially … I mean it’s quite daunting. You’re in an organisation, you know, it’s not like you can do something and you can get out of it, or everybody else has got proper jobs and so what I had to do was actually contributing to someone’s job and, you know, it was quite a big pressure, but you had to do it, there’s no way out I suppose, you just got on and do it. (Colleen 1F : 446-450).

Responsibility does not necessarily have to create pressure, but can bring a sense of achievement. Hence Kirsty, having asked to be moved on from a rather unchallenging role, found herself taking responsibility and learning from the experience. For Tony, learning occurred through:

‘(Pause) Trial and error. Can you give me an example? The computer systems that they use are slightly questionable and they’re a little bit outdated, but I don’t feel that anyone in the office has got particular time to help me with things and as myself, even they’ve said I’ve excelled as a trainee and learn everything quicker than anyone has done before they’ve every seen, so because of that they’ve just left me to my own devices.’(Tony 1P : 511-515)
In most cases, the students perceived themselves as employees who were left to just ‘get on with the job’ and therefore a balance had to be struck between asking for help and not being a constant distraction to co-workers. In addition, students were often expected to take on additional responsibilities when their line managers are away, as in the case of Rachel and Joanne, where they had to use their initiative to deal with any issues which arose.

The experience of successfully coping with challenging, unfamiliar situations helped students to develop their confidence, enabling some to actively seek increasing responsibilities and leadership roles in the organisation. These included leading the discussion in meetings (Rachel 2P, Leo 1F), being in charge of projects or departments (Rachel 2P, Emily 2P) and seeking promotion (Kirsty 1F, Tony 2P). However, two students acknowledged making major mistakes when carrying out their responsibilities or when confronted with unfamiliar situations, but they were able to reflect and learn from these less positive experiences (Rachel 2P, Leo 1F).

7.4.2 Placement context: developing interpersonally, through a range of changing relationships with others

This was a striking aspect of the placement experience and a strong theme amongst the students interviewed. It would have been possible to have categorized them as ‘the development of communication skills’, but what unified all of the experiences being described was the fact that students were finding themselves undergoing a series of changing relationships with others. These ‘others’ might be other employees, colleagues, different levels of managers and customers/clients.

One aspect described by the majority of students related to way in which they were now coming into contact with a wide range of people they had previously not encountered. This poses issues and problems for students, a major issue being the need to develop the ability to relate to a range of different people. For Rudy, this means working out what to say to the ‘security guy’:

‘And when you’re in the working environment, it’s a lot…. you don’t say….., you know, you don’t talk about certain things and so I found it quite a hard adjustment to like finding topics that I can talk to people about because I mean, for the first two months I’ve been trying to work out a conversation I can have with the security guy, because I don’t….., because he’s not interested in what I’m interested in. Those that I mention, he’s like ‘Mmm, not really.’, you know. So, yes, it’s a bit of a learning curve in that sense. (Rudy 1P: 94)

Emily, in her role, found that she was meeting people she would not usually come across: all ages, all nationalities. However, even where the range of people was more restricted, students still commented on the need to relate to other individuals. Thus Wayne comments:

‘although my department’s relatively young I’m still … I would assume a good four years maybe younger than anyone else in the team and on top of that most people that I go in work with or meet people outside again, I’m probably … well I’m not even half the age of most people, so it’s very different … it’s a different mindset I think. Maybe the way you talk and interact with people … different generations is completely different. (Wayne 2P: 310)

He went on to described how he had started to read a daily newspaper in order to be able to participate in conversations with colleagues about topical issues.

Students described a range of different types of interaction with others. These included:
• persuasion (involving empathy and assertiveness);
• managing expectations (when one is unable to deliver, when customer is in the wrong, when the student is in the wrong);
• reassurance;
• appeasement;
• pacification;
• negotiation;
• exchanging opinions;
• asking questions without losing face;
• obtaining information;
• conveying bad news;
• representing others;
• standing up for oneself;
• making presentations (conveying information, opinions, leading discussions); and
• liaison.

The students spoke most fluently about these experiences and it was obvious that these had made a significant impact on them. The nature of these was such that successfully ‘coming through’ led to an increase in confidence. This will be discussed in the following section.

7.4.3 Placement context: developing interpersonally, through a range of changing relationships with others

Confidence

The majority of students found that they developed in confidence. Although they commonly used the term ‘confidence’ to express their sense of change, the development of such confidence was linked to a variety of experiences. Joanne refers to a developing sense of confidence that embraces the ability to accept that she may make mistakes. This allows her to act:

‘Um, I think I take the bull by the horns now, and I sort of dive straight into it, instead of standing back and … I’m definitely far more confident than I was at the beginning, um, I just … because I sit next to my manager um you know, we’re quite close and I can hear everything she does and we work really closely together, so I’ve just kind of followed in her footsteps really and just followed her advice, she’s really helpful, so you know if she notices that I’ve … I don’t know, perhaps given some wrong advice to staff, you know, we’ll just…we’ll have a meeting or something … we meet every Friday just to see how things go and, um, she’ll say, ‘Well, next time perhaps if we tackle it this way’, um, and I just take on board the advice that I’m given. (Joanne 2P: 91)

Where an employer has confidence in a student, then that rubs off on the student. John was asked to train a new colleague in the use of Excel:

‘I mean it was all basic stuff to me, but to someone who’s never used it or really used the program in-depth, um, so that was sort of … that was learning for her, but obviously for me as well. You know, it sort of … it gave me confidence in the fact that obviously my team knew that I could do this. They felt confident in me to be able to teach her all the relevant stuff and then … so I spent the afternoon with her taking her through all the stuff and that and I think we both got something from it which was … I found that good, you know. (John 1F: 464)
A combination of the interpersonal and the intrapersonal: prioritization

Several students talked about how their ability to prioritise had been developed by their experience on placement. Developing the ability to prioritise involved several aspects of the intra- and interpersonal. The following are all aspects that were described by students:

- an ability to identify personal goals:
  - an ability to set personal wishes on one side (deferred gratification);
  - a sense of perspective concerning ‘success’ or ‘failure’;
  - learning patience.
- knowing one’s capabilities and what can be achieved within a time span
- an ability to adapt to changing work goals/demands
- an ability to say ‘no’ (assertiveness):
  - managing the expectations of others;
  - dealing with pressure
- accepting ‘failure’ or mistakes

These comprise a complex set of interacting aspects. To manage these successfully is, indeed, to ‘grow up’.

The ability to prioritise reinforces a growing sense of confidence and leads to others acknowledging your right to do choose what to do and when. Holly found that, not only did she learn to manage her workload, but her colleagues respected her for this:

‘Oh God, yes, definitely. I’m much more confident. Much more confident to anything … anything … I don’t … I know when to say no (laugh) as well. (Holly 2: 462) I’ve got my own work to do and I don’t … I think people respect me for … in a weird kind of a way.’ (Holly 2P: 478)

7.5 The improvement in academic performance of placement students

7.5.1 A more focused application towards final year learning

The theme of a more focused application towards learning was the strongest to emerge from the interviews. This arises from a developing sense of self but cannot be seen in isolation. It is clearly connected with the findings discussed earlier in relation to the strong motivation that students have to do well in their final year, their increased confidence arising, in part, from interpersonal development but also from a growing sense of efficacy. Thus it is highly likely that this contributes to an improvement in academic performance in the final year.

The focused application to learning was evidenced in most students’ comments and was usually expressed with considerable conviction. The central change that students identified in terms of either their imminent or actual return to university was their intention to work hard and with more focus. For each student this has a particular character and flavour. For Holly, the final year is the ‘most important year of her life’ and she intends to try to maintain her placement work routine and mindset when she returns to her university studies. (Holly 2P:552)

Leo, on resuming his final year studies, explicitly refers to the fact that his motivation has changed, and he too refers to putting in the hours, otherwise he feels that he’s ‘wasting valuable
time’ (Leo 1F: 70). Later in his final year, Leo confirms that he has more or less adhered to this more disciplined regime:

‘I don’t know why, I feel guilty with myself, really, sometimes I don’t need to be out of bed before ten, but it just feels like you’ve lost some of the day and you’re not going to get that back, so’ (Leo 2F: 59).

Wayne expresses similar sentiments, and also refers to the fact that his concentration span has improved (Wayne 2P: 274).

Luke uses the term ‘work ethic’ (Luke 2F 1:105) to describe the attribute he has acquired during placement and that he now applies at university, whereas Rachel observes that she is now ‘more focused and do more off my own back rather than thinking ‘that’s what I have to do’ and that’s it.’ (Rachel 2P: 173).

Paul, too, referred to a changed view of the university on entering his final year. There is a sense that he is about to take personal ownership of what happens in his final year:

‘I was thinking about this as I was walking down the corridors actually. I really was thinking about the fact that whereas before it was just an institute that I was kind of … I was trying to do what they wanted me to do, whereas now I’m coming back to use the university (laugh). So that’s probably what I should have done in the first two years. I’m really determined to …’ (Paul 2P: 747)

Spencer, who had previously worked in a firm of accountants in his gap year and undertaken part-time jobs whilst at university, had already developed a disciplined approach to work and his studies. However, he confirms that he observed a noticeable change in the way his friends approached their studies when they returned from placement:

‘Well they’re more mature, they seem to be more motivated, um, seem to be more organised, you know, you just notice a more mature person come back after, you know, eight hours a week now doesn’t seem like such a hard thing. You know, I think you see people moan more before … ‘Oh God, university, how tiring is this?!’, you know, and now … they realise … ‘Well let’s enjoy this final year, it’s not that gruelling’, do you know what I mean?’ (Spencer 2P: 442)

This phenomenon did not necessarily apply to all students and it is interesting to consider the position of those in that category. Colleen, now in her final year, indicates that she wanted to work more consistently, adhering to the ‘nine to five’ regime, but comments that ‘it hasn’t been a success really’ (Colleen 2F: 570). This is not surprising as Colleen admits to not enjoying her course and has found it difficult to engage with her studies. However, Rudy does not propose to change his approach to his studies in the final year because he is already on target to achieve a good degree classification based on his existing approach, where he has always been organized and clear about what he wants to achieve. (Rudy 2P: 233)

7.5.2 The limited realisation of a potential for cognitive development: the integration of theory and practice and ‘seeing business differently’

The QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Business and Management state the placement is a means of supporting the ‘integration of theory and practice’. This is translated into the following

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11 Paul’s second interview took place at his university.
objective for the placement year within the university programme for this project: ‘to allow students to reflect on and apply theoretical knowledge gained from their award’. These two objectives differ in wording and, possibly, intent. Notwithstanding this possible difference, this section will discuss themes that arose within the interviews which are relevant to these two objectives.

Within the interviews students did not readily reflect on the application of theoretical knowledge. As such it was difficult to identify a strong theme. Three aspects emerged as central:

- the extent to which first and second year studies informed students’ experience within placement;
- the extent to which their placement experience led them to question the inter-relationship between theory and practice; and
- their changing view of business.

The extent to which first and second year studies informed experience in placement

It was difficult to identify the extent to which prior studies informed experience in the placement. This arose because all students found it difficult to recall what they had studied in the first and second years of their degree course, where the first year (level 1) does not contribute towards the final degree classification, and the second year (level 2) contributes 25 per cent.

Where recall was possible, some students found that they were able to recognise or ‘name’ what they encountered on placement as a result of their studies, but few students volunteered specific examples of how particular subjects related to their placement experience. These aspects are discussed in more detail below.

Difficulties in recalling what had been studied in years 1 and 2

Emily’s response, at being asked about her prior studies, was fairly typical:

‘Um, I’ve never really thought about it actually, maybe I should have done. I can’t remember what theories I spoke about either.’ (Emily 2P: 644)

Usually a student might mention a particular concept, and then struggle for further examples:

‘well looking back I struggled to remember what I studied anyway (laugh), apart from the fact that somebody at work the other day mentioned three hundred and sixty degree feedback (laugh), and I was like, ‘I thought that was just theory!’ (laugh). (Paul 2P:648)

Clearly the above had an impact on Paul, as something which he had studied takes on a new aspect and it is no longer ‘just theory’. But he did not identify any further examples.

Spencer found it difficult to recall theories he had studied previously, but he is quite certain that some would not work in practice:

‘So, to be honest I can’t think off the top of my head anything to do with any of the theories that we’ve learnt, but, um, but there were certain ones where they just wouldn’t work in real life. They’re theories, you know they’re fine on paper, but you couldn’t put them into practice. (Spencer 1P:392)
The problem with lack of recall is that there isn’t then much to reflect upon. However, even with recall, there can be premature closure because a theory isn’t deemed to be ‘relevant’.

‘I mean are you finding ... if you think back now to what you studied in the first and second year, do you see any of that differently now? Um, not really. No. A little bit I guess, because sort of … (pause) … I can’t really remember it actually. (Laugh) Then obviously not. (Laugh) Yes … I don’t know, it is just very different in the real world. I think it is really … the same sort of underlying theories apply, but I think it depends on what type of environment the company is in. I don’t know. Yes. So thinking, say, what did you do in the first year?[module name] yes, that sort of HR [human resources] wasn’t it? Yes, mmm. But I mean I don’t really have anything to do with HR. Except that you’re in one of the human resources now. True.’ (Laugh) (Holly 2P: 197)

Holly, in not seeing herself as a human resource, has closed down upon an opportunity to reflect on one particular aspect of her studies.

**Recognising and labelling business practices**

Some students commented that their prior studies provided them with a way of naming practice:

‘You can put different names and posh business names with what you’re actually doing’ (Emily 1P: 97)

When Rudy is asked ‘Do you see how you could apply those theories or how they might be relevant?’ he responds:

‘To modern business? Some of them are. I mean, I hear…. It’s been useful in the fact that when I hear names mentioned, or particularly HR stuff, a lot of HR stuff I hear, like I know what’s being said’ (Rudy 1P:84)

For Rudy, theory gives him an entrée into participation, rather than an entrée into critique. This is not surprising since a major theme for Rudy was the need to find a way to participate or network within his placement organisation.

Chloe found that recognizing and being able to relate aspects of university studies with practices in the workplace provided her with some status and some sense that university learning might have some practical value (Chloe 2F:443). For Chloe this is particularly important, given her general sense of equivocation about her studies. However, this appeared to be a lone occurrence and she was not able to provide any further examples.

**Where there is recall: bringing existing knowledge to placement**

Students were generally not able to recall specific areas of knowledge that they brought with them to placement. At one extreme Rudy perceived quite a separation between university and placement such that:

‘The only real skill that I seem to be able to take from University is time management where my ability to like plan things, the discussion-based learning that you do in your lectures and with tutorials, when you discuss things, and gene…. because I do Business Studies and this is a business environment, general business knowledge, but apart from that, there’s…. you know’ (Rudy 1P:81)
However, where knowledge is brought to placement, then it can mean that it is seen differently as a result. Joe refers to two concrete examples:

‘I can see you can implement things and I can see how … um, when you see things being implemented in the workplace it’s a lot easier to understand the importance of something than someone teaching it to you in the lecture hall and there’s no other way of doing it, you can’t get round it that’s the problem, but seeing things implemented, um, just all the different techniques you use … even like management and organisational behaviour, you can see all the different things, you know, going on around you and ‘Oh that relates to that’, and then it all becomes … it sort of like sets into place just a little bit.’ (Joe 2P:47)

But in the main, students were generally vague in their discussion of this. Rachel indicates sparks of recognition but no sustained enquiry, and expresses some disappointment at not being able to directly apply what was studied at university to her placement work:

‘Good old [organisational behaviour (OB)] Because things keep coming back and, you know, different structures and the different, um, things that they’re implementing … ‘oh yes, that was OB all those years ago’, and things like that, but I mean I haven’t really put into practice that much from university, it’s been, you know, different things and none of it has been straight accounting or … it’s business … [ ] I had visions of it going in and using what I did at university, you know, in the office whereas it’s worked out where it’s been new things and, you know, I haven’t quite put into practice everything … ( Rachel 2P: 354)

It is interesting to note that Rachel was the only student to comment on this revised vision of ‘using what I did at university’.

7.5.3 The extent to which students’ placement experience led them to question the inter-relationship between theory and practice

Once again, there was relatively limited reflection on this. There were two main aspects that students commented upon. Firstly, they considered that their learning would be, or was, made easier as they were able to relate it back to their experience and, secondly, they found that theories do not quite work out in practice.

Can see what theory meant or relating it to what you know

Students did not necessarily talk about ‘theory’, but referred generally to how they might make more sense of things in the final year, based on their placement experience. For example, Emily observed:

‘I think it will fit into my course a bit more now, because I’ll know what I’m thinking about when I look at marketing and the mailing things that we have to do’ (Emily 2P:355)

This is rather more vividly described by Holly, and she does refer to ‘theory’:

‘you know, HR is all … well it’s all theory and here I can see I’m not in HR, but HR policies that are being put around the company I can see … now see what that theory meant, whereas before … and learning for exams I was like ‘Yes … so and so points for this aspect and then so and so many points for that’, but I couldn’t … I couldn’t … I think it would help you understand more if you could really imagine what happens which is why I think a placement’s important’ (Holly 1P:209)
But it is unclear exactly what students mean when they refer to ‘theory’ or whether there should be a relationship to ‘practice’.

**The distinction between theory and practice**

The tone of discussion changed when some students talked about theory and practice. Robin positively values his experience of the ‘outside world’ and learning from experience (Robin 2F:211), and Rachel, although finding that she is ‘not using what I did at university’, talks about the positive aspects of ‘seeing lots of bits we don’t cover’ (at university) (Rachel 2P:496). However, Rudy’s tone is rather more strident and disappointed:

‘Well there is definitely a big difference between theory and practices. We might have all these great models and things, but, you know, a lot of businesses don’t go ‘Why don’t we just go through Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, you know, certainly won’t call it Maslow’s, they are using an adaption of it, it’s given me a really good insight into how things are done, but the theory and the practice there is definitely a difference between it. It’s not like a … businesses don’t employ a strict way of doing things … like a strict model. They don’t use any models that you would find in books very often, it’s just sort of, you know …’ (Rudy 2P:53)

He had expected a ‘strict way of doing things’. This appears to be related to an absolute way of knowing. There is a sense of personal disappointment in that his expectations have been confounded.

Tony also refers to the way in which his expectations about theories have not been met:

‘Yes. Um, it’s shown me a different side to business. It’s shown me that my theories … not my personal theories, but theories from university, sometimes don’t necessarily work in, actually in the field, they don’t quite transfer quite correctly.’ (Tony 2P: 500)

Again, it is interesting to note Tony’s use of terminology. It appears that he expected the theory to ‘transfer correctly’ and this also appears to be related to an absolute or transitional way of knowing. Consequently this has changed Tony’s outlook, but instead of leading to a questioning of the nature and role of theory and practice and further reflection, this causes him to be disillusioned about some aspects of his studies:

‘It’s made me feel that some subjects are also irrelevant. Like? Marketing … I understand the importance to an organisation, but the depth at which they go into it here at university to show us all of the aspects which I feel are very important … but some of it just doesn’t transfer into the real world. Um, I don’t feel that some of it is … what organisations can actually use. It just isn’t useful. I feel that some of it’s just theories for theory’s sake, based whatever actually being the working model. (Tony 2P: 521)

Spencer voices similar concerns about theories which he has studied but which do not appear to relate to his experience (Spencer 1P:392). Spencer’s and Tony’s comments suggest an absolute/transitional way of knowing which appears to lead to a focus on the difference between theory and practice, rather than a reflection on the role of theory and its relationship to practice.
7.5.4 A changing view of business

Students were asked if they saw business differently as a result of their placement. From their responses it was apparent that most students now had a changed view of business that could inform their final year studies. Key aspects of their experience were as follows:

- business is now seen as a *process*.
- changed perspectives of organisations: their goals, controls, their efficiency, the roles of teams, departments and individuals within the organisation

We also found that although almost all students had previously undertaken part-time work, seeing aspects of business differently came as a surprise.

**Business as a process**

Students’ responses overwhelmingly indicated that they now saw business as a process. But students varied in the way that they related to this and differed in the emphasis placed on particular aspects of the process. For Emily, her perception of business as a system or process is relatively unformed:

‘I don’t know actually. I suppose I would in the sense that there’s always … that there has to be somebody doing each job to make the whole thing happen kind of thing which you never really think about, you always just think of a business don’t you and that’s it. You don’t think about the systems ... All the little things that go on inside it.’ (Emily 2P: 350).

This contrasts with Wayne who clearly sees this as a major issue, experiences frustration with the process and expresses his views quite fluently and forcefully:

‘It’s a very slow process. Um, it’s unbelievable the amount of time that things take to be done. Not so much as in a task, but it’s because … I think because of the department where I work as well where contracts are agreed and things are negotiated, some people … you can send them an email and you can wait a week for a response and things like that, it really frustrates me.’ (Wayne 2P: 369)

‘it’s such a big process almost. So many people and parts and teams are involved in all these negotiations and discussions. You can’t do anything on your own. You have to work with people and they’ve all got different ideas and mindsets and I think that’s part of the downfall almost … not that everyone should act the same and think the same, but that’s one of the most time consuming things … agreeing on things, even internally, not externally, internally … just to get everyone heading in the same direction and going for the same thing, it makes such a difference.’ (Wayne 2P: 373)

This is probably expressed so fluently because it is a matter close to his own heart - because he would like to design his own processes:

‘That’s right actually and, you know, to be fair they do need the processes I suppose and … because it would just be mayhem otherwise. [ ] But, at the same time, maybe it can be a little frustrating from a personal point of view. [ ] Obviously the size of the organisation, they’ve got to have something in place or there wouldn’t be a structure, but from a personal perspective I’d like to design my own processes and decide what I want to do.’ (Wayne 2P:396)
Organisations – changing perceptions

John now sees organisations differently but places his emphasis on why companies act as they do:

‘Well I knew obviously that finance was important anyway as regards businesses, because, you know, profit is what they try and make, so I think now looking at it … decisions that companies make … whereas before without having a sort of background knowledge you think, ‘Well why are they doing that?’; but you can sort of … well you know why, you’ve got a good idea of why companies are doing it like to cut overheads or to cut costs or, you know, why mergers take place, things like that. You can look at sort of more of the background rather than, you know, that’s what’s been decided and you don’t know anything about it. Um, so I think it’s definitely made me look at businesses differently.’ (John F2: 328)

Paul distinguishes between business, which he feels is understands well, and organisations, which he now sees as comprising teams of individuals (Paul 2P:55). This may be why Paul then goes on to reflect about organisational goals and the way in which projects are organised, and the realisation that decisions are taken by ordinary people (Paul 2P:175). Once it is realised that it is down to individuals to take decisions, this then raises the issue of their expertise. And here Paul finds himself surprised and starts to question his own assumptions about expertise:

‘And actually, you know, you start to see that not everybody knows what they’re talking about, he knows what he’s talking about in this area, she knows what she’s talking … and you see the fact that, you know, on the outside you see a mass of knowledge and information in an organisation, but when you get inside it’s bits of different people kind of coming across [ ] I’m probably struck a little bit by just how it’s not what I thought it would be in terms of, you know, the people and stuff.’ (Paul 2P: 180)

Similarly Rudy finds that that his assumption that a company would be efficient is challenged by his experiences in the very large global organisation that he works for (Rudy 2P:21), and Tony now realises the importance of procedures and processes in controlling a business and comments on the importance of getting things right first time Tony 2P:508).

Part-time work experience

As most of the students had undertaken part-time work in the past, the question arises whether any of the aspects referred above should have taken them by surprise. However, it appears that students do not necessarily engage in part-time work in the same way that they engage in placement. Rachel tends to have an open, questioning attitude towards her placement and now realises that she did not apply that questioning approach to her part-time work (Rachel 2P:522). For Emily, she has a different attitude towards her part-time work because is not related to her future career (Emily 2):961).

8. Supporting the development of a reflective capacity: further research and a pedagogic framework

The findings discussed above indicate that an improvement in final year performance may not be due to cognitive development in the sense of changing beliefs about knowledge. Rather, it appears that improved academic performance arises from a developing sense of self (through interpersonal and intrapersonal development) that leads to a more focused application towards learning. We found that placement provides a range of experience that might be integrated with
prior learning and lead to cognitive development but this potential is realised only in a limited number of ways. 

These findings arise from a particular context and this places a limitation on the extent to which they might be transferred to other contexts. However, the context described is not untypical of many business and accounting degree programmes and we feel that many educators across a range of disciplines may recognise the central themes within their own teaching experience.

These findings have implications for both future research and for pedagogy within the undergraduate and pre-professional curriculum\(^{12}\). These will be discussed below.

### 8.1 Implications for future research

The value of the findings from this study arise from overall picture that they provide of the student experience of work-based placement learning and its relationship to the development of a reflective capacity. However, having established major themes within the student experience, this then provides a framework for the identification of finer-grained research that is required in the areas of motivation and cognitive development. We consider that curriculum development would benefit from further research in the following areas:

**Motivation**

As discussed in Section 7.3.1 and 7.3.2, motivation plays a key role in how students view their learning environment. Yet the motivation of university students has not been extensively researched. As a consequence, relatively little is known about what motivates students and the nature of motivation itself. Jacobs and Newstead (2000) identified two quite different orientations, with some students being motivated more by subject-related activities and others by generic activities (skills and experiences). Our findings confirm that such a distinction may be particularly pertinent for business and accounting students. We are aware that the descriptions of motivation provided in Section 7.3 may serve their purpose when taking the holistic view required by this project. However, it does not do justice to the complexity of individual motivations (Valle et al, 2003; Dörnyei, 2000) that were apparent for the participants in this study. This is clearly an area where further research is needed into the nature of student motivation within business and accounting.

**Cognitive development within ways of knowing**

The interviews tapped into students’ *professed* beliefs about knowledge. A central finding was that students found it difficult to recall and talk about their prior studies. Thus we cannot necessarily assume that such professed beliefs will be *enacted* when a student engages in a learning task within a particular subject area. Further research is required into *enacted beliefs*. This would involve the use of think-aloud protocols and retrospective interviewing to identify the nature of how students think about knowledge as they work on a task (Hofer, 2004b). Or it could involve a ‘hot review’ (Louca et al, 2004) to analyse class interaction. This task- and context-related approach is essential as an assumption underlying ways of knowing is that they can be context-sensitive.

\(^{12}\) Curriculum is used in its widest sense as covering the entirety of a degree programme, individual years and modules. It also embraces all aspects of pedagogy and learning resources.
Understandings of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’

As discussed in Sections 7.5.2 and 7.5.3, the stated QAA and university objectives regarding the role of placement in supporting the integration of theory and practice were not generally achieved. The business and accounting area involves study of a number of different, but related, subject areas. These subjects will vary in the type of theory that underpins their conceptual foundations. Thus it is important that students are able to understand the nature of this variation and the role of theory within a particular subject. This is demanding for students. We consider that further interview-based research is required into meanings that educators and students attach to the terms ‘theory’ and ‘practice’.

8.2 Implications for pedagogy

As discussed in Sections 7.1 to 7.3, Boud and Walker (1998) highlight a range of issues ranging from misconceptions about the nature of reflection to strategies that seek inappropriate levels of personal disclosure. One particularly common problem is that students and educators may be involved in ‘recipe following’ where ‘elements of modes of reflection are turned into checklists which students work through in a mechanical fashion without regard to their own uncertainties, questions or meanings’ (Boud and Walker, 1998, p.192). As Boud and Walker point out the danger with such checklists is that they lead to a false expectation of what reflection is (linear, about external knowledge and unproblematic). Of course, an absolute way of knowing would predispose a student to seeing a checklist in this fashion and the existence of the checklist would confirm an absolute view. Educators vary, too, in the way in which they regard the notion and role of ‘reflection’. Thus it is important that there is a clear pedagogic framework supporting the development of a reflective capacity. This should not be an imposed framework since the framework itself can be the focus of enquiry. Accordingly, we wish to obtain feedback on how best to develop and explain the pedagogic framework discussed below.

8.2.1 A proposed pedagogic framework to support the development of a reflective capacity

We have seen that the placement offers a rich developmental and learning environment for students. Placements clearly vary in the extent to which they support students and the range of challenge available to students. However, even those students whose experience was disappointing felt that the placement had been a learning experience. Accordingly, in discussing pedagogy, we pose two questions:

• How can the benefits that arise from placement be made available to non-placement students?
• How can the placement experience be improved to support students’ cognitive development in the sense of changing beliefs about the nature and source of knowledge?

We propose a pedagogic framework that rests on the following principles:

The student takes central responsibility for their own learning
The benefit of placement appears to arise from the provision of a context in which students have to take responsibility for their own learning and performance. Students cannot avoid taking this responsibility as they feel accountable to their employer and colleagues. They are also motivated by the fact that such experience will improve their employability. This sense of responsibility contrasts with what appears to be a relative detachment from their university learning. Their learning in the first and second years is not readily recalled and does not count substantially towards their final degree classification. Whilst recognising that university cannot readily mimic a placement, we consider that a central issue within a pedagogic framework is how the university can best support students in taking responsibility for their own learning.

Learning involves an enquiry into: a) the nature and role of knowledge within business and accounting; and b) the nature of reflective practice

The placement experience does not appear to support cognitive development. As discussed in Section 7, this may be due to several factors. Firstly, students tend to focus on achieving a qualification and do not express any substantial intrinsic interest in business-related subjects. Secondly, students find it difficult to recall much of their first and second year studies; hence this is not readily available for interrogation and reflection during their placement experience. Thirdly, students did not readily reflect on their experience generally. Finally, it may be that placement, as an environment, does not provide the necessary challenges to beliefs about knowledge. We found that students do not have to take significant independent decisions or exercise significant individual judgement – situations that are thought to foster cognitive development through the challenging of existing beliefs.

The university regards itself as an environment within which cognitive development can and should take place. The QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Business and Management state the placement is a means of supporting the ‘integration of theory and practice’. This was translated into the following objective for the placement year within the university programme within this project: ‘to allow students to reflect on and apply theoretical knowledge gained from their award’. These two objectives differ in wording and, possibly, intent. What underpins these two objectives are assumptions that theory and practice are of such a nature that they can be ‘integrated’, or that theoretical knowledge can be ‘applied’. However, such assumptions can be questioned. We therefore propose that a further central issue within a pedagogic framework would be on enquiry: into the nature and role of knowledge within business and accounting. This will involve an enquiry into theory, its relationship with practice and judgment and the role of ‘evidence’. Such an enquiry will also involve an enquiry into the nature of and role of reflection and reflective practice.

Learning involves an enquiry into practice: that of the student and of others

An enquiry into the nature and role of knowledge will involve a major source of knowledge: that of experience derived from practice. Two forms of practice are central:

- that of the student: educational and concurrent practice (part-time and voluntary work);
- that of others: lecturers and peers within education and colleagues and managers within placement; and

This framework is set out in Figure 3.
8.2.2 An explanation of, and justification for, the pedagogic framework

Central responsibility is taken by students to reflect on their own learning and practice. Two forms of practice are the subject of focus: that of the student - educational and concurrent and that of others. Educational practice embraces the role of the student at university. Concurrent practice may be any other practice that the student is involved with; three have been identified here: part-time work, placement and voluntary activity. The latter might also include sports and social activities. The practice of others embraces university and other contexts. At university it might be the practice of lecturers, fellow-students and learning support educators. Within the Figure 3 we have separated the practice of the student from the practice of others. However, this framework would also involve a reflection upon participation within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).
The prime foci of enquiry are the role and nature of knowledge within business and accounting, and the role and nature of reflection and reflective practice. The student’s reflective practice might be supported in many ways including the use of learning journals, role-modelling by educators and ‘hot’ task-related reflection. This enquiry would be implicit and embedded within all subjects.
Secondly, we draw on complementary literature to support the framework. In particular, we shall draw on the work-based learning literature. Clegg and Bradley (2006), in their work on models of personal development planning (PDP), analysed models of practice in relation to PDP. Three ideal types of PDP were identified: professional, employment and academic. The employment model was found in courses that did not necessarily lead to professional careers, such as business studies. Accounting leads (for some students) to a professional career. However, Clegg and Bradley use the term to describe professions within which reflective practices are well-embedded such as nursing, medicine and teaching. Within this employment model there is an emphasis on the development of generic, transferable skills that lead to employment. Reflection is not the main feature of this model although there is a requirement for reflection on learning in its broadest sense. Clegg and Bradley (2006, p.69) observe the implications of this emphasis:

‘the sorts of PDP produced in these contexts reflect their general reading of the market, not in the sense of a particular professional set of values, but through a more focused concentration on employability. The language used to describe PDP in this context is much more utilitarian, and staff in these areas feel they face greater difficulties in convincing students of its value. Rather than a shared set of well-understood principles based on the shared value of reflection in PDP, as in the professional model, the employment model throws up a series of dilemmas for the staff in motivating students to participate, as the rewards are perceived by staff to be extrinsic rather than central to disciplinary values.’

Our desire to obtain feedback on the proposed pedagogic framework arises, in part, from a recognition that the business and accounting area, with its disparate subjects, lacks this ‘shared set of well-understood principles’. This has been identified by the work of MacFarlane (1997;1998).

Clegg and Bradley (2006) go on to observe that there was little evidence that staff related to a broader literature, notably, the work of Eraut (2000) on non-formal learning or the work on connectivity (Guile and Griffiths, 2001). This literature, they point out, provides a basis for the theorisation of reflection in work-related contexts. It is to this broader literature that we shall now turn.

Guile and Griffiths (2001) argue that new curriculum frameworks are needed to allow work in all of its forms to be used as a basis for the development of knowledge, skills and identity. They propose a typology of models of work experience within which they argue that a ‘connective’ model will provide the basis for a productive relationship between formal and non-formal learning. The connective model aims to achieve both vertical and horizontal development. Vertical development refers to the progression of learning through the degree programme. Horizontal development refers to the ability to identify relationships between work experience, its underlying knowledge and skill and its context (cultural, social and technological). Guile and Griffiths emphasise the role of work experience within horizontal development. However, we would argue that in business and accounting, horizontal development should also involve the overcoming of a subject silo approach through an emphasis on connectivity between different business-related subjects.

A focus on *enquiry* within this area will thus expose the differing assumptions about the role and nature of knowledge in each subject area and provide conditions for connectivity to be addressed. The inclusion of judgment within this enquiry arises from the relationship of
judgment within practice. As discussed in Sections 2, 3 and 4, critical reflection expects individuals not only to think critically but to move towards critical being, which will ultimately involve action (Barnett, 1997, p.1).

Their connective model is based on a ‘reflexive’ theory of learning. This involves the student in a critical reflection upon the nature of work, its context and varying forms of learning. However, we would prefer to move away from an emphasis on work towards an emphasis on practice. Practice is all-encompassing and provides a term to cover action (including work) within all contexts. As we have seen students may not necessarily conceive of their part-time jobs as ‘work’. This emphasis on ‘practice’ will also support a focus on the relationship between theory and practice.

The idea that students should engage in a reflection on their own practice is not a particularly new idea within higher education. In recent years this aim has been supported by a growing range of theoretical and practical support (Moon, 1999 and 2004). However, supporting the development of a reflective capacity is not straightforward and, as discussed above, it is easy for the best of intentions to be thwarted (Boud and Walker, 1998). Hence the proposed framework develops the ‘reflexive’ theory of learning to address the nature of reflective practice itself.

8.2.2 Another pedagogic framework?

Within business education there has been much debate about the role of undergraduate education. This has tended to focus on the issue of whether it should comprise a study of business or a study for business (Tolley, 1983, p.5). It is apparent from the QAA Benchmark statements that business and accounting education is seen by the QAA to incorporate both of these aspects. A study for business recognises that there is a vocational aspect to education. Students should be adequately prepared for employment in business. A study about business recognises that education can fulfill a wider role, that of allowing students to study the role of business in society, incorporating sociological, legal, economic or ethical aspects.

We propose that a pedagogic framework to support the development of a reflective capacity incorporates both of these aims. These two aims are not regarded as either competing or complementary. Rather they are re-framed to sit within an aim that students can be supported in learning how to practice effectively within business. Of course, the notion of effectiveness raises issues of values and norms and we would expect that notion, itself, to be the subject of enquiry.
References


Appendix 1 - Interview protocol example

1st interview with placement students

Introduction

This interview is intended to solicit your ideas about your learning. There are two phases in the interview.

1. The first one relates to your experiences during your second year at university.
2. The second concerns learning whilst you are/were on placement.

It will be an open-ended interview in order to allow you every opportunity to offer your ideas and thoughts on each aspect of the learning experience that we discuss.

Although we shall be talking about your experience in the second year, learning experiences probably have occurred both in class and outside class, for example, at work, home or in social or voluntary activities.

Feel free to talk about any experiences of ideas that come to mind as we discuss each area.

I’d like to remind you that all aspects of the study will be kept strictly confidential and only that individual data will not be released to teaching or placement staff.

A report on the study may be submitted for publication. Within that report we may use brief quotations from interviews and, if so, pseudonyms will be used. No identifiable reference will be made to the placement organisation.

Phase 1 – learning during the second year at university

First of all, I’d like to talk about your learning during the second year at university.

What did you study during your second year – tell me a little about it….

As you think about the last year, what is the most significant learning experience that comes to mind?

A  What made it significant?
B  Why is it more important than other experiences?
You spent a lot of time in classes. Let’s talk about the classes that you had during the second year.

A First of all, talking about lecturers

What things have they done to help you learn?

What things did they not do that would have helped?

Did you have much to do with the lecturer? How did this help you learn?

How did you feel that you got on with the lecturer? Did this affect your learning?

What relationships have you had with lecturers? Did these affect your learning?

What suggestions do you have for change?

B Now, talking about other students

What interactions have you had in class with other students? Were these interactions helpful?

What interactions have you had out of class with other students?

Were these interactions helpful?

What activities with other students do you find you prefer/or find helpful?

Why?

C Now, let’s talk about you

What ways (methods) of learning have you found that work for you?

Why do you find these effective?

D Thinking about the course overall

What did you experience on the course that was helpful?

What did you experience that was not helpful?

How could things have been improved? Why?

E Thinking about varying points of view – inconsistencies, conflicting views, disagreements

Did you come across this during the second year?

How did you deal with this? How did you come to a view?
Why do you think these conflicting views arise?

Thinking about learning outside the university - in your work (prior to placement), home and social life….

Have you found that these aspects of your life have helped you learn?

Why?

Have you found that any of these aspects of your life have hindered your learning?

Why?

Thinking about university again, is there anything you would change about any aspect of the environment here to make learning more effective?

Thinking about decisions that you had to take during your second year.

A Did you encounter the need to make any decisions about what to believe in the subjects you studied during your second year? If so, describe the situation, how you decided, and why.

B What educational or career decision did you make in your second year? Describe that decision, how you approached it, and why.

Phase 2 - learning during placement

Describe the most effective learning experiences you had during placement (so far).

Inquire as necessary about:

A The nature of these experiences
B Whoever is supervising you (Your supervisor’s role)
C Your role as learner/employee
D Co-workers’ role
E How was your work evaluated and your perception of the degree to which your work was evaluated effectively.
Describe the least effective learning experiences you had during placement so far.

Inquire as necessary about:

A  The nature of these experiences
B  Your work supervisor’s role
C  Your role as learner/employee
D  Co-workers’ role
E  How was your work evaluated and your perception of the degree to which your work was evaluated effectively.

Describe your role as a learner during placement

A  How are you going about your learning on placement? Why?
B  Is your approach similar to, or different from, the way you approached learning during the second year? Why?

Thinking about decisions that you’ve had to take during placement

A  Have you encountered the need to decide about things you were doing at work during placement? If so, describe the decision, how you approached it and why.

Thinking about decisions that you’ve had to take apart from during placement

A  Have you made any major decisions generally since you left uni in June? If so, describe the decision, how you approached it, and why?