

## **Experiential Work-Integrated Online Learning: Insights from an Established UK Higher Education Program**

*by Lydia Arnold*

The BA (Honours) Learning, Technology and Research ([BA LTR](#)) fully online degree was launched in 2003 as part of the [Ultraversity Research Project](#) at [Anglia Ruskin University](#). The program enables students to learn at work, through work, and for work, helping them to learn and earn in a complementary way. Through this approach, learners gain the opportunity to learn more about what they do and to use their experience as a vehicle for the development of additional competencies. Learning for work is motivational for learners and advantageous to employers, who benefit from the evolving skills of their employees and the improvements that emerge from learner inquiries.

The program does not have a subject-specific curriculum or disciplinary approach. Rather, the BA LTR transcends individual professional differences, developing learners who can research and inquire while utilizing a range of technologies. Learners develop knowledge suited to their respective specialties; knowledge acquisition is learner controlled, context shaped, and acquired through individual research rather than direct transmission. Barnett (2005) suggests that the university's role is to build in its learners "the capacity to cope, to prosper and to delight in a world in which there are no universals . . . it is a task of—and a challenge to—the university to provide those capacities" (794). The BA LTR answers Barnett's call by blending technological facilitation and experiential learning to develop the competencies, skills, and knowledge learners will need to thrive in an age of [supercomplexity](#).

The program is underpinned by five operational concepts: personalized learning, work-based learning, inquiry-led learning, exhibition, and online community. The technology brings these concepts to life in a fully online environment. While each of these concepts has influenced practices in higher education, this program represents the first time, in our experience, that they have been used in cooperation with each other and on such a large scale. This article explores the nature of the learner's experience of the BA LTR, the benefits of the program's blend of approaches, and the emerging issues and challenges that confront the program. The data informing the analysis were drawn from three sources: researcher interviews, the community archives (as all asynchronous exchanges exist as data), and facilitator observation.

### **Personalizing Learning**

Fundamentally, the BA LTR seeks to enable learner choice. The overall structure of the program is based on three major levels of study, each of which contains its own set of supporting modules ([Exhibit 1](#)). Within these broad course parameters, however, learners make their own choices about their learning. They decide what their areas of research will be, which research methods they will use, what the pace of study within modules will be, what media they will use to present data, whom their audience will be, and in some modules, what activities they will undertake to promote certain learning outcomes. Learners shape content according to their own learning needs, determining their starting point by examining their current knowledge and skills, considering possibilities, attending to workplace needs, and designing milestones or learning goals to meet both their own goals and the needs of their workplace.

This process is not imposed all at once but is gradually introduced with scaffolding so that, from the beginning, learners have a detailed template that they can use to develop their plans (Arnold 2006). The electronic independent learning plan is crucial in guiding learners through decision making in the early stages of the program ([Exhibit 2](#)). In later modules, learners take progressively higher degrees of control. Facilitation

also helps to alleviate the sense of strangeness or overload that learners may experience when taking control of their learning. Often, students have had prior learning experiences in which they exercised little or no control, and the majority of the program's learners have been out of the formal education system for some time. To assist learners in making decisions about their own learning, facilitators advise, question, and guide them during each stage of the program ([Exhibit 3](#)).

The technology underpinning the program links learners to each other and to the institution and offers learners the opportunity to choose the pace, time, and location of each learning experience. Program resources are always available and the community provides an archive of all discussions. The asynchronous nature of the community allows learners to determine where and when they learn and how much they contribute; the permanence of community contributions means that learners who are not working at the pace of the majority do not lose the benefit of the pertinent discussion; and access freedoms allow learners a higher degree of control over their learning.

## **Learning and Work**

BA LTR learners are employed while they are in the program. The workplace environment, organization, and roles of learners provide the context and experience from which they select their topics or areas of practice for research. Throughout the learning process, learners must align their learning needs with the expectations of each of the three program levels as well as the needs of the workplace organization. This structure strengthens decision-making and learning-design skills and forces learners to consider critically what they need to learn, how they will learn it, and why it is important both to them and to their organizations. This alignment of context, self, and educational requirements constitutes the process by which experience affords learning opportunities.

The process of negotiating learning requirements between the workplace and the university is not always smooth. Boud and Solomon (2001) note that one of the fundamental characteristics of work-based learning should be partnership between the higher education institution and the employing organization. Garrick and Usher's (2000) discussion of work-based learning assumes that the workplace organization has some level of control over the learning; for example, the organization might have input into course design. When this level of control is not formal and the learner is the agent of negotiation, conditions that foster trust, autonomy, and a culture of improvement in the workplace facilitate study ([Exhibit 4](#)).

Although the prevalence of difficulties in negotiating appropriate research topics is not known, tension has been observed when workplace input is perceived to be high or when learners feel that learning decisions are controlled by workplace colleagues or agendas. Difficulties can also occur when workplace involvement is low or absent or when learners seek input in the workplace and encounter disinterest. Despite the challenges these situations pose, learners who negotiate these tensions appear to be strengthened by the experience, gaining confidence along with conciliation and research defense skills ([Exhibit 5](#)).

Difficulties may also arise from the nature of the real-world learning context, insofar as events may change the situation as the learner is investigating. A number of students have, for a variety of reasons, changed their employment roles or contexts and then had to apply what they know about learning and research to a different situation. However, in navigating these uncertain terrains, learners gain confidence in managing their learning. For example, when Learner C moved from a teaching role to an administrative position, he was able to continue to learn using newly acquired strategies; his success in the program was not dependent upon the stability of an existing content-knowledge base.

## **Linking Work and Learning through Inquiry and Exhibition**

While students face challenges in aligning their work in the BA LTR program with the needs of their

workplace settings, the twofold emphasis on inquiry-led learning and exhibition in the program allows students to formulate research plans that address topics related to their professional practice while also sharing the contributions of their work with others in their organizations.

The role of inquiry-led learning in the program is most pronounced in its emphasis on [action research](#), whereby learners investigate key issues in the workplace that have become familiar to them in their day-to-day lives. As the program unfolds, students pursue activities that promote critical reflection on the distinctive problems, changes, and emerging needs of their workplace environments and how these issues relate to their own potential areas of professional development. In turn, as students isolate and define these areas of inquiry, they formulate research projects that address a topic that they determine to be relevant to their own circumstances. In pursuing these projects, students use rigorous methods to examine recognizable issues through a different lens; in Barnett's (2005) terms, the learners become strangers to the world around them in order to gain new insights. While action research (or "action inquiry," as it is termed in the BA LTR modules) is a component of all three of the program's three major levels of study, it is pursued most extensively and comprehensively at the third level, during which students synthesize their prior findings ([Exhibit 6](#)) in the design and completion of a sustained research project ([Exhibit 7](#)). In this way, the workplace setting becomes the laboratory for learning where employees assume new perspectives towards their professional practice.

In their final year, after the research is completed but before it is evaluated, students undertake an exhibition process in which they share their final-year research with their colleagues, research participants, and other interested parties from within, and occasionally from outside, their organization ([Exhibit 8](#)). While action research by definition links learning to the workplace, the exhibition provides a visible and physical link. The exhibition serves several additional purposes: First, it enables students to seek feedback from others to inform further learning. Second, it provides a means for the dissemination of research findings. Third, it is an opportunity to celebrate the achievement of the individual student. And finally, the exhibition offers an opportunity to use and develop a range of planning and preparation skills as well as presentation skills.

Through these components the BA LTR program allows learners to connect their work needs to their learning at a fundamental level. As Harvey and Norman (2005) have observed, such a link promotes high levels of motivation in learners, and the feedback we have received from program participants certainly confirms this claim. The following comments from students in the BA LTR online learning community illustrate how students experience the benefits of close links between their work and learning:

Researching topics that will make a difference to me personally has been more motivating and has made a big impact on the way I do my job. I'm a better teacher because I've had the opportunity to look at issues that affect me and my practice personally.

[Researching my own topics] has to be an asset as it allows ownership of the end product. When I was at school, I excelled (because I worked harder) at the subjects that were interesting to me and I won't mention the results of ones that I didn't enjoy.

The BA LTR students clearly want not just to learn, but also to become better learners and thereby more effective, informed practitioners in their professional careers. The authentic learning context provides a complex, changing environment in which students can make choices about learning. This environment gives learners a genuine connection to the content of their learning that concretely links theoretical and practical worlds. While the university struggles to keep up with the pace of change in the real world (Barnett 2005), the research-based program equips learners to interpret and operate within that world through their own negotiation of meaning and configuration of theory and practice. One student commented on the applicability of the knowledge she gained in the BA LTR program and the significance of the strategies she acquired in managing her application of knowledge:

When I completed my [qualification] in computing, I attained a degree level knowledge and understanding of a wide variety of aspects of computing but left with a distinct inability to practically apply any of it to the real world. I would undoubtedly have had to take an apprenticeship or workplace-training equivalent in whichever specialization I would have chosen to pursue to learn the practical application within a specific workplace role. At that time, my husband, who had only a long-gained hobbyist's practical knowledge, was more capable of day to day tasks than I, the qualified one, was. By personalizing our research we were able to apply the theory we had been learning within a practical environment. We were given first hand experience of how it works and how to make it work in the way we wanted. To me, this served to eliminate the need for the apprenticeship part of any subsequent employment. I felt much more confident in my abilities as a result of this and feel we all left as much more work-ready graduates.

This learner clearly felt equipped by her work in the BA LTR program to link theory and practice in her workplace role.

## **An Online Community of Inquiry**

Before the program starts, learners are encouraged to visit an introductory blog space to gain pre-course updates, try some practice activities in an online environment, and begin sharing their thoughts, ideas, and preconceptions—in effect, to begin to form a community. When the program begins, the facilitator engagement level is high, as technical issues need to be overcome and learners enticed to contribute. Other key early discussions involve setting out mutual expectations and rules of engagement, such as defining what is sometimes called netiquette. The program creates a culture that, in addition to demanding general consideration for others, is shaped by university regulations regarding such issues as, for example, how much feedback can be received. Through modeling and defined activities, the facilitation team seeks to create the climate of openness that is essential for community learning.

This climate of openness combined with the camaraderie in our group of mature students facing the challenge of the BA LTR together facilitates an inspiring experience. From the outset, learners are encouraged to share their work and openly critique each other's writing. This approach is an effective learning accelerator, allowing learners to develop apace their evaluative and analytical skills.

Learners are expected to visit the community on a regular basis. Inevitably, learners demonstrate different levels of commitment to the community; some visit every day, while others put in two sessions in a week. These visits count toward the advisory minimum 10 hours per week that students must spend on the course in addition to their activities as reflective practitioners or researchers in the workplace. The student's time on the course is split between individual activity, online community activity, and work-based activity ([Exhibit 9](#)). It is difficult to accurately quantify the time that students give to the course as learning time is so inseparably intertwined with practice. Recommendations for allotted time can only be applied effectively to the individual and community elements of the program.

The online nature of the program roots the learner experience in a virtual learning environment (VLE); this is the facilitated area. The overwhelming majority of discussion, conversation, and exchanges occur in the VLE, although there are spin-off areas of dialogue through blogs, wikis, and VoIP services such as [Skype](#). Core course conversations are planned, though facilitators use a range of techniques to enable dialogue, including starting discussions, modeling feedback, posing critical questions, linking to resources, and acknowledging contributions ([Exhibit 10](#)).

The design of the virtual space creates a community structure that seeks to maximize learning opportunities while remaining manageable for both facilitators and learners. Each learning facilitator is assigned approximately 30 students, taking responsibility for tracking their progress, administering program activities, and providing guidance. Through the community design, facilitators also engage with the wider group. The community is comprised of cohorts with smaller learning sets within them ([Exhibit 11](#)). The VLE also has

space for cross-cohort dialogue, allowing knowledge and experience to circulate between learners at different stages of the program. Primarily, though, dialogue is focused between learners in the same stage of the program.

Learners in the program are all undertaking individual research and, therefore, the common ground for discussion does not lie in talking about what has been learned directly through research and inquiry, although learners may create spaces for this type of dialogue. Instead, a collective consideration of the nature of each task forms the basis of community discussion. This process involves aligning individual contexts with the task requirements and later, in discussions, reflecting on the process of learning that has been undertaken. In effect, the shared experience of the community resides in dialogue about the learning process. Within the BA LTR, "[t]here is a sense of learning together by talking about their learning, engaging in co-constructivist dialog, focusing on learning about learning" (Carnell 2007, 37). This heterogeneous community structure moves the discussion from a content focus toward a focus on the learning process. The eclectic community provides opportunities for individual meta-learning through dialogue ([Exhibit 12](#)).

The asynchronous character of the VLE allows contributions to be steeped in greater levels of reflection than would perhaps be possible in a face-to-face environment. Moreover, the community provides an environment in which learners can articulate and adapt their views and understandings, in effect relearning and adopting flexible value systems, a process articulated in a learner's own summary:

The community gave me an opportunity to debate ideas with other people[;] by this method you have to learn to express your opinions in a balanced way, to see what others are saying and if necessary to moderate or define your views.

Learning in a collaborative space such as the BA LTR community demands high levels of trust, since learners expose thoughts and ideas that may not be fully developed in an effort to build them. Learners rarely talk of the learning community without using words such as support and trust. The overwhelming majority of learners feel that the relationships and conditions of honesty in dialogue are critical for allowing real learning to occur. This community space provides the ideal conditions for helping learners (and particularly returning or nontraditional students) build the confidence to learn.

While the benefits of community are vast, there are, of course, challenges as well. The task of navigating messages in a community can be difficult and learners may become discouraged if they feel unable to keep up or offer contributions to discussions. Strategies have been devised to promote manageability in the messaging protocol. For example, one group of students adopted the strategy of forming learning pairs or triplets, whereby learners create small groups or subcommunities for intensive engagement. A student expressed the benefits of the approach, saying that "partnering up with just one or two people in the final year was a big stress saver."

The technology central to the program has also presented challenges for many, as learners have been forced to adapt to the unfamiliar online world. That said, there are benefits to the process of learning how to learn; meeting the challenge develops not only technical skills but also deeper underlying characteristics and proficiencies, such as coping strategies and confidence.

## Conclusion

Through a range of practices, educational institutions can blend learning strategies and approaches in order to prepare learners for the information-rich, ever-changing world of work. Whether the approach described here can be adapted or replicated to reach new learners or to enhance current programs remains to be seen. Questions emerge not only about the larger potential of this learning approach, but also about how to improve learning and about the limitations of operability. These include:

- How can facilitators use technology to further advance personalized learning?
- How can a fully online course offer a further choice of modules for study while maintaining sustainable staffing?
- What are the benefits and disadvantages of the community architectures and facilitation strategies used?
- What are the most effective techniques for grouping learners online for small group engagement?
- What, if any, are the limits of inclusion for a heterogeneous community of inquiry for learning? Can a community of inquiry truly support all professions in learning?

This article is intended to illustrate only one possibility for experiential learning in an electronic paradigm, and thereby to foster debate on how and why experiential learning can be blended with Internet technologies. The issues emerging from the combined approaches of this established program may provide fodder for further work on other ee-learning models.

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