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Title

Reading, writing and apprenticeships: developing an authentic reading and assessment strategy for graduate apprenticeships.

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Abstract

The recent launch of graduate apprenticeships in Scotland requires participating universities to collaborate closely with employers to design and develop innovative curricula to enable apprentices to acquire new knowledge and develop relevant skills both in a traditional university learning and teaching setting as well as in the workplace. This paper argues that the additional context of learning situated in the workplace provides a particular impetus to consider and reflect the requirement and deployment of authentic reading strategies and authentic assessment regimes as essential design elements in these programmes.

We present a discussion of the approach we are adopting to designing curricula and preparing learning and assessment resources for graduate apprenticeships in Business Management and Business Management: Financial Services. We focus here specifically on our plans for helping apprentices on these programmes to navigate the plethora of information resources available to them and develop effective reading strategies and information literacy skills in both academic and professional contexts. We indicate how the enhancement of these skills forms an important precursor to tackling the authentic assessments designed for apprentices to evidence their professional and academic learning during their apprenticeships. Our planning and design activity draws first on aspects of our recent research into reading skills and strategies among professionals and business students, as well as on our established track record of delivering a variety of work-based learning programmes.

It is envisaged that findings and lessons learned from our work will help guide and inform other institutions across the UK as they establish curricula for graduate or degree apprenticeships.

Keywords: graduate apprenticeships; authentic reading; authentic assessment; information literacy; information resources; employability

Main findings

The introduction of Graduate Apprenticeships (GA) in Scotland heralds a model of work-based learning guided by principles and characteristics which emphasise the situated nature of learning for real-world application (Skills Development Scotland 2016). One of the key characteristics and requirement of a graduate apprenticeship is that “learning in work must be fully integrated into the delivery and assessment” and should “support reflective learning and the development of reflective professionals/practitioners” (Skills Development Scotland, 2016:4). To this end, these apprenticeships are a collaborative effort between universities and employers with “significant ongoing involvement and contribution from employers” in key tasks including “curriculum development, delivery and assessment” (2016:4). For Business School providers of GA programmes, the expectations are of an emphasis on real-world applications and problem solving to deliver on the ambitions of a wide set of stakeholders including the learner, the client organisation, and the sector in which the organisation operates with ensuing benefits for the economy and society.

We argue that work-based learning programmes such as GAs may well provide the optimal spaces for learning for professional development provided that underpinnings of authentic reading and authentic assessment are consciously coupled with pedagogies which reflect a combination of associative, constructive and situative approaches (after Mayes and de Freitas, 2004) in the design.

The launch of the GA initiative presents many institutions with a new challenge in that rather than having periods of work experience “sandwiched” into degree courses, the work experience component and the university component happen concurrently and are intertwined. Consequently the integration of theory with practice must be paramount in the design of these programmes in order to achieve professional and vocational competence.

For effective learning to take place in this different environment, we recognise the imperative to consider fresh approaches to design and delivery. From the outset, we are placing emphasis on the need for authentic assessment (Lombardi and Oblinger, 2008) in order to meet the requirements and expectations of learners, employers and the GA scheme itself.

Reading is widely regarded as an essential ingredient for learning but in terms of design for higher education courses the engagement and impact of learners with reading and the consequences for performance in assessment is not fully surfaced in the literature. Reading requirements are often addressed only via reading lists with limited instructions for students on how to use and develop their reading as a core skill to underpin their learning. In the GA context, the challenge is that such reading lists must include a broad range of texts, both academic and professional, and apprentices will need clear guidance on how to navigate, engage with, and evaluate the range of information sources available to them in order to help them apply their learning purposively in the

workplace. Building on previous projects to examine the use of learner time for effective and critical reading on an MBA programme (Sutherland and Nichol, 2014) and the role of reading for professional development purposes (Fulford, 2102) the paper provides direction towards the integration of reading strategies and associated learner activity within the design of authentic assessment.

We see the requirement for authentic reading as necessary and essential for authentic assessment, and in turn see authentic assessment as necessary and essential for the integration of theory and practice in order to achieve the ambitions of GAs. The value of assessment in higher education continues to attract significant discussion and debate both within the academy and in wider society. It is anticipated that assessment in GAs will also be of significant interest to all stakeholders.

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