

# A Life-Wide Curriculum: Enriching a traditional WIL scheme through new approaches to experience-based learning

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## Introduction

For over 50 years the University of Surrey has been at the forefront of the Work Integrated Learning movement in the UK through a curriculum model that requires programmes in all disciplines to provide opportunities for year long work placements at the end of the second year of study. As a result, University of Surrey graduates are consistently at or near the top the graduate employability league tables in England. Because of this excellent record, in 2005 the University was awarded a five year grant to establish the Surrey Centre for Excellence in Professional Training (SCEPTrE)<sup>1</sup> with a remit to provide additional resources and capacity to enhance further the educational model and to broaden its impact.

Taken at face value it would seem that we have a very effective educational model, but closer inspection indicates that only 50% of our undergraduates participate in our *Professional Training* work placement scheme. We are in a classic change dilemma – do we sustain a proven model that seems to work well for some students or do we change what we are doing to try to add value to the experience and development of more students? SCEPTrE has concluded that we need to do both. But one of the ways of enhancing our traditional curriculum model is to embrace a much broader conception of a curriculum and this paper provides a simple description of a concept that we are calling a life-wide curriculum<sup>2</sup>. The idea that higher education is one component of a life-long process of learning is well established in educational policy and practice throughout the world. The idea of a life-wide curriculum is proposed to highlight the potential for drawing learning from the diverse experiences that a learner may encounter during a single episode in the life-long journey – their higher education experience. The concept is represented in Figure 1.

**Proposition:** a life-wide curriculum is the most appropriate concept for a higher education experience that sets out to help students develop themselves for a lifetime of learning in an infinitely complex ever changing world. A life-wide curriculum seeks to highlight the potential for drawing learning from the diverse experiences that a learner may encounter during their higher education experience. It is an inclusive concept intended to recognise that universities are complex enterprises for learning and that many people (not just teachers) contribute to students' learning and development. It is an opportunity enhancing and enabling concept rather than a policy for making people do things they don't want to do. The concept is learner driven ie outside the requirements of the formal academic curriculum a learner can choose or not choose to include her experiences and learning in her unique learning profile. The idea is not about forcing learners to account for their everyday experiences but to encourage the university to think about learning in a more holistic way and to support and communicate this view of learning so that learners eventually see the benefits. The challenge for a university that adopts a life-wide curriculum

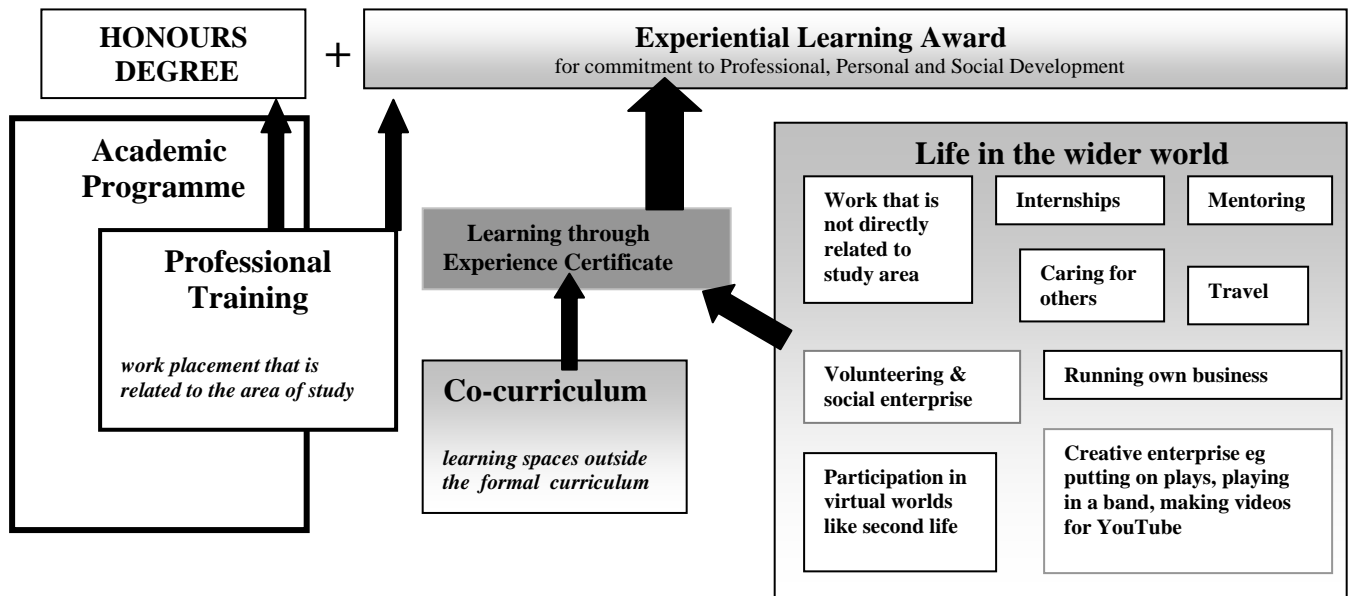
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<sup>1</sup> SCEPTrE is one of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning established IN England through a five year Government grant in 2005/06. The Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) initiative has two main aims: to reward excellent teaching practice, and to further invest in that practice so that CETLs funding delivers substantial benefits to students, teachers and institutions. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/>

<sup>2</sup> The term curriculum is being used as a general descriptor for the totality of learning experiences that are used and recognized by teachers and learners, and from which learning is derived and valued in the higher education learning profile of a learner. Such experiences include the formally validated modules of a study programme, work experiences that are incorporated into the award, additional curriculum experiences outside the award-bearing programme and other experiences.

will be to develop a culture that recognises the potential for enhancing students' learning and their experiences of higher education by valuing learning derived from all parts of this curriculum and create the means to support, recognise and value such learning. At the University of Surrey we are proposing to develop an Experiential Learning Award to enable learning to be recognised from those aspects of a Life-Wide curriculum that are not recognised in the academic award.

**Figure 1 Scope of the Life-Wide Curriculum / Experiential Learning Award concept being developed at the University of Surrey<sup>3</sup>.**



**Learning potential of a life-wide curriculum**

The most powerful argument for a life-wide curriculum is that it contains more potential for learning than any other curriculum! Adopting a life-wide curriculum changes the paradigm of what counts as learning and where learning occurs. It shifts higher education into a more experience-based model of learning (Andreason et al 1995) i.e. the experience of the learner occupies central place in the learning process. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. A key element of experience-based learning is that learners analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it in order to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience.

An experience-rich curriculum that engages with the full breadth of a learner's life also provides an environment within which a more holistic conception of learning and individuals' sense of being in the world can be appreciated. We can appreciate much more (Beard et al 2007:5) 'learning through being, doing, sensing, feeling, knowing and changing'. (Beard and Wilson 2005:4) provide a powerful and comprehensive visualization of this whole learner, whole world interaction through the metaphor of a 'learning combination lock'.

Learning that is grounded in experience, especially when it is a rich, meaningful and immersive experience has the potential to contribute to all forms of learning identified by Marton et al (1983 p283-

<sup>3</sup> See <http://lifewidecurriculum.pbwiki.com> for more details and an update on progress in implementing the idea.

284) and most importantly, support development of the most elaborate forms of learning. Experience of working and learning in different environments is also essential to developing a repertoire of ‘ways of knowing’ and ‘being able to come to know’. Knowing is part of action and it lies at the heart of the epistemology of practice. It complements but is different to explicit and tacit knowledge and can only be gained through acts of doing and being (Cook and Brown 1999).

Baxter Magolda (1992 and 2001) identified four qualitatively different *ways of knowing*. These are:

- *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
- *Contextual knowing*: knowledge is contextual. One judges on the basis of evidence in context.

If a learner only possesses a way of knowing that is absolute, then he or she is unlikely to cope well with problem-solving in the conditions of uncertainty that characterize the real world. However, a student who possesses an independent way of knowing is likely to feel more confident, and be more effective, in such a situation. A student who has learnt in lots of different experience-based contexts will realize that knowledge, in real world problem working, is often strongly situated and contextual. A way of knowing is more than an academic cognitive skill that can be “developed” through carefully designed learning activities. It is firmly a part of who you are – your identity. In other words, changing one’s way of knowing is to change as a person.

Our line of reasoning is that if we are to claim that higher education is preparing learners for a complex world then we and they must pay particular attention to the epistemology of practice(s) in the social, professional and working worlds that they will enter when they leave the academic environment. The epistemology of (professional) work practice (coming to know what to do through doing in a specific situation or context drawing on past experiences which includes learned theory) can only be learned through the experience of practising with other practitioners. The epistemology of practice pays particular attention to the idea of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning for a complex world requires learners to appreciate and experience the epistemology of practice in professional situations that are relevant to chosen career pathways and more generally in other social practice settings embodied in the idea of a life-wide curriculum.

Raelin (2007) identifies the building blocks of an epistemology of practice as:

- *Extensive use of tacit knowledge* – the tacit processes that practitioners use as they work through the problems and challenges of daily practice. Such knowledge is deeply rooted in action and involvement in a specific context in a specific time. But while people may be knowledgeable about what they do and can do it, they may not be able to explain how they know what to do.
- *Critical reflection* – the thinking capacity to make sense of their own practice and experiences and mindful habit of doing it. Or the ability to think about how their actions resulted in a particular outcome. This ability results in the creation of a personal ‘real time’ learning environment through which beliefs, assumptions and mental models as well as actions, can be tested and evaluated.
- *Mastery* – people develop their expertise not only by repeated practice in a single domain but by acquiring skills in multiple contexts. Mastery is developed through an appropriate apprenticeship in which novice practitioners are exposed to embodied practice, apply and develop their own practice, are encouraged and given feedback on their performance and gradually take on more and more responsibility. Developing mastery is coupled to the development of tacit knowledge and knowing, and the ability to evaluate and learn from own experiences through critical reflection.

Michael Eraut’s (2007 and 2008) more pragmatic visualisation of an epistemology of professional practice (based on empirical evidence of how professionals actually work), complements Raelin’s conceptions. He notes that the basic epistemology of practice involves the professional actions of:

- *Assessing situations* (sometimes briefly, sometimes involving a long process of *investigation and enquiry*) and continuing to monitor the situation;
- *Deciding what, if any, action to take*, both immediately and over a longer period (either on one's own or as a leader or member of a team);
- *Pursuing an agreed course of action*, performing professional actions - modifying, consulting, evaluating and reassessing as and when necessary;
- *Metacognitive monitoring of oneself*, people needing attention and the general progress of the case, problem, project or situation; and sometimes also learning through reflection on the experience.

His empirical observations of how people learn in workplace settings, either as explicit learning activity or a by-product of work, provides the basis for new and useful tools to help learners in work situations to observe themselves and others, and think about what they are doing and the effects of what they are doing more wisely.

There is one particular type of learning experience that the life-wide curriculum can usefully open up. *Immersion* is a metaphor to describe a state of being which can have both negative consequences – being overwhelmed, engulfed, submerged or stretched, and positive consequences – being deeply absorbed or engaged in a situation or problem that results in mastery of a complex and demanding situation. *Being immersed* in an extremely challenging experience might be very uncomfortable but it is particularly favourable for the development of insights, confidence and capabilities for learning to live and work with complexity and messiness. It is in these situations that we need to draw on both our intellectual and our creative resourcefulness. SCEPTRe is currently exploring the meanings of immersive experience (Jackson and Campbell, 2008) and the contexts in which it occurs. It is clear that a life-wide curriculum offers much more opportunity for recognizing immersive experiences than a more traditional curriculum.

### **Changing perceptions of curriculum**

A life-wide curriculum seems to be in tune with the complexity of learning experiences required to prepare people for a very uncertain world – it's a common sense idea. The common sense proposition is that a life-wide curriculum holds more potential for learning than a traditional curriculum which combines and integrates academic study and practice with a year long work placement. Furthermore, there are many good arguments drawn from learning science that support the need for more complex conceptions and experiences of learning in the higher education curriculum such as would be supported by a life-wide curriculum. However, having an inspiring idea and persuading a university to embrace the idea and the practices that would give concrete substance to it are entirely different matters and SCEPTRe is only at the first stage of a long process of introducing it to the university.

Strategies that have been employed to date include:

- 1) *Influencing conversations*: rather than central proclamations the explaining/persuading process has involved many 1:1 conversations and the circulation of an ideas paper to the champions who have worked with the Centre and to lots of people who support learners and learning outside the formal curriculum. This personalized introduction to the idea has helped people come to terms with it and see how it might have meaning for them in their areas of practice. The accumulated feedback has been useful in refining the idea and developing confidence in it.
- 2) *Gaining the Vice Chancellor's support*: fearing that our embryonic ideas might be scuppered if they were progressed through the institution's Committees we took our ideas to the VC who was receptive and agreed to provide a supportive top statement for our ideas paper. *'Surrey enjoys an unrivalled position with its professional training year and employment record for our graduates which many years ago grew out of a clear understanding of how to relate higher education to the needs of employers and employees. SCEPTRe's ideas for introducing the concept of a 'life-wide' curriculum to address learning in a complex world, could prove equally valuable in helping our graduates succeed*

*in the future and I encourage you to support this initiative*'. This endorsement of the life-wide curriculum idea conveyed the message that there was support from the top for the idea.

- 3) *Identifying existing practices* that support the ideals of a life-wide curriculum and provide the means to enable these wider conceptions of learning to be recognized, applied and valued (1, 2, 3 and 7 Table 1). These existing practices are being supplemented by new infrastructures and practices (4, 5, 6, 8 Table 1).

**Table 1** summary of the new practices and tools being developed, extended or adapted to support a life-wide curriculum. Practices that encourage learning through and reflection on experience, and the development of a culture of sharing experiences.

<b>1) Personal Development Planning and 2) e-portfolios</b>	It is the reflective capacity and ability to engage in what amount to action learning processes that enable learners to represent and record their learning and engage in productive conversation about the learning that emerges from a life-wide curriculum. Reflective tools, use of electronic portfolios and institutional PDP policies enable the idea of a life-wide curriculum to be operationalised.
<b>3) Mentoring (peer to peer, staff –student, student-staff) and Student Advisors</b>	There are many mentoring schemes around the campus. The process is one of identifying the leaders of the schemes and persuading them that there is merit in considering the idea of how their scheme might be part of a life-wide curriculum. The learning through experience award also requires its own mentoring support so a new group of mentors is being developed.
<b>4) Story telling competitions</b>	SCEPTrE organises an annual story telling competition focused on important aspects of experiential learning. The last competition (January 2008) focused on stories of immersive experience. 27 stories were submitted and made available through a wiki. The stories have been analysed and the important characteristics of immersion have been identified.
<b>5) Shareexperience.net</b>	This web site is for Surrey students involved in personal development experiences outside of the curriculum, such as the placement, part time jobs and extra curricular activities such as volunteering, mentoring and travelling. It is similar to a social networking site, where students can share experiences and through reflection, support and mentoring can learn from these experiences to enhance their personal development and maximise the opportunities university offers, outside of the classroom. When fully developed <i>the site</i> will also host useful resources, videos, articles, podcasts and links, covering a range of topics such as how to use software packages to information about graduate jobs, what employers are looking for and news direct from the Students Union that will all soon be available on the site.
<b>6) Surrey Island Second Life</b>	A small project to examine, like many universities, the educational value of this type of virtual world.
<b>7) Professional Training Frameworks for placement learning</b>	Each department within Surrey's Year long Professional Training Scheme currently operates its own schemes of preparation, support and assessment tools although all must comply with the regulations for the scheme.
<b>8) Learning through Experience Certificate</b>	The certificate provides a framework within which social practice contexts other than traditional professional training environments can be recognized and the learning derived from experiences in these contexts can be valued. The process standards can be found at: <a href="http://www">www</a>

- 4) *The development and trialing of new approaches* to enhance opportunity for experience-based learning and new infrastructures to support this type of learning enterprise including:
- A new Learning through Experience Award that can be customized to suit most significant experience-based contexts.
  - A co-curricular Cultural Academy to enable students from diverse cultural backgrounds to share their native cultures and enquire into the University campus as a multicultural society.
  - A co-curricular Enterprise Academy to enable students to practice being enterprising and learn from the experience.
  - A new student organization 'CoLab' to foster collaboration between students, the university and business.
  - 'Story telling' competitions to encourage and value stories of rich experiences in which important learning occurred.

- A new social networking site to encourage students to share experiences and the insights they have gained through such experiences.
  - Initiation of a project to examine the educational potential of Second Life and purchase of Surrey Island.
- 5) *Persuading a small number of people* who support or employ students around the campus to try out the new Learning through Experience Certificate.
  - 6) *Presentation of the idea outside the institution.* There have been a number of opportunities to present the idea of a life-wide curriculum in public audiences, to rehearse the arguments for such an approach and to gain feedback from audiences that do not have interests in maintaining the status quo. Such opportunities permit the rehearsal of arguments, and expose ideas to other institutional contexts but are lower risk in the sense that if people don't like the ideas it is not going to damage the chance of introducing the ideas back home.
  - 7) *Creating a bid for funding to two external agencies* that contained within it the Life-Wide Curriculum proposition that a) involved cooperation of several central units b) involved debating the proposal and proposition in institutional committee c) required senior managers to support the bid.
  - 8) *Persuading colleagues to embed the intention to explore the Life-Wide Curriculum idea in the university's new Student Experience Strategy* - this embeds the idea in a policy and an action plan and extends ownership of the idea to the university.

These strategies whether planned or opportunistic were aimed at making the idea of a life-wide curriculum and experiential learning award more concrete and meaningful to practitioners and institutional decision makers, and extending ownership of the idea from SCEPTRE and a small group of interested practitioners to the whole university.

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