

Academic Quality and Internships

Students' account on the value of theory in practice

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Abstract

At Kristianstad University in Sweden it has been decided that all study programmes should have work-placed training consisting of at least a period of five weeks. In different strategy documents the University states that the main reason for this is to raise employability. At the same time the importance of maintaining academic quality is stressed.

Interviews were carried out in 2006 with 22 students from The Health Promotion and Education Programme concerning what they perceived as the value and relevance of the concepts that are essential to academic quality, scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection, with respect to their practical activities during their internship.

The results of the study show that the students perceived the value and relevance of the concepts quite differently. The five different patterns or categories that emerged: undeveloped, separated, performance-oriented, oppositional and participatory all give different prerequisites for developing professional expertise.

The study reveals the importance of the students perceiving academic thinking to be important to their practical activities during their internship, but also the significance of a greater interaction between theory and practice for maintaining a better standard of education within higher education and for developing the prerequisites for professional expertise.

Introduction

Within higher education there is the idea that by connecting education more closely to working life the employability of the students is thereby increased. The introduction of work-placed training or more internship is one way that might make this connection (Knight & Yorke 2003; Knight & Yorke 2004; Moreland 2006).

At Kristianstad University in Sweden, it has been decided that all study programmes should have internship or work-placed training consisting of at least a period of five weeks. In different

strategy documents the University states that the main reason for this is to raise employability. At the same time the importance of maintaining academic quality is stressed.

These prerequisites provide an interesting question whether and how or in which way the vocational elements can be incorporated into an academic discourse and in what way academic thinking can be firmly established in a practical context.

The Health Promotion and Education Programme at Kristianstad University was started in 1998 and integrated the subjects of teaching and learning with public health science. At the time of the study the programme contained 10 contiguous weeks of internship. The students in the Health Promotion and Education Programme represent a new and partially ill-defined theory, public health education, and the practicum within which they perform their internship is distinguished by a complex field comprising a number of different competencies and by richly varied work tasks (Karlsson 2005).

This paper addresses an important question in this context: How do the students in the Health Promotion and Education Programme perceive the value and relevance of the concepts that are essential to academic quality, scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection, with respect to their practical activities?

An empirical study on the basis of this question may of course be performed in different ways. The theoretical foundation(s) and perspective(s) one starts from determines to a large extent where one begins, but also where one ends up. The distinguishing mark of academia and its relation to internship and to employability thus needs some theoretical elucidation.

Theoretical points of departure

In Sweden, the Higher Education Act (Sv. Högskolelagen) (1992) emphasizes that all higher education, in addition to the purpose of giving students knowledge and skills, shall also stimulate their personal development to critical, reflective and independent individuals, responsible professionals and active members of society. Higher education should not only be characterized by information exchange on a scientific or scholarly level but also by an element of doubt regarding existing information, critical analysis, independent thinking and construction of synthesis. It should also give students the capacity to participate with insight in the future development of knowledge within the field of education together with the ability to argue and reflect (The Higher Education Act, (Sv. Högskolelagen), 1992). The purpose of higher education is not just to engage in the creation and distribution of information but also to develop fully the

diversity of skills needed to encode, decode, ponder, interpret, evaluate and reach decisions on the basis of this information (Barnett 1999; Rhoder & French 1999).

In many of the professions that Universities train for a large section of the professional practice depends on their professional judgment, is not just about doing the right thing, but to ask what you do and why, and to consider different alternatives (Boud & Walker 1998; Eraut 1985; Griffiths 2004). This is well in line with what could be seen as the core of academia and the guiding star for higher education. Instead of just emphasizing the importance of critical reflection in an academic discourse its importance for future work should also be emphasized (Warner, & Tranter 2001). Learning at university and during the work-placed period may imply adjusting to routines and rules but should focus on critical thinking that challenges status quo (Ellström 2005; Lester & Costley 2010; Raelin 1997).

Schoug (2008) argues that academic credibility and employability could go hand in hand. It is usually not just the subject knowledge employers primarily want but the intellectual capacity, capacity for independent problem solving, critical thinking, analysis, source criticism, language skills and abilities to express oneself well in speech and writing. A view also supported by other international studies (Bradshaw, 1992; Candy & Crebert 1991; Harvey Geall & Moon 1997, Marginson 1993 & Warn & Tranter 2001).

Employers appreciate critical ability because it is an essential skill for both adapting to innovation and leadership (Harvey, Geall & Moon 1997). According to Harvey, Geall & Moon (1997) employers would like to have employees that are adaptive, adaptable and transformative. Employees should therefore be well prepared for work, be able to take the initiative to develop new ideas and also actively develop the organization by inspiring and leading others. To support students' development in terms of these abilities is an important task in educating employable students (Warn & Tranter, 2001). Studies in higher education should therefore inspire students to be self-governed and help them to drive development rather than be driven (Niblett, 1990).

That academic credibility and employability could go hand in hand is supported by several studies about professional skills and expertise. Fundamental to these is that they demonstrate the importance of the need to reconcile an act at different levels, and to vary between routine problems and new or unfamiliar problem situations.

Ellström (2005) talks about learning at work as primarily production-oriented or as a development-oriented process. The former is distinguished by a view of learning as following

given instructions and directives and adapting oneself to situations that occur. Many of the tasks that must be handled in practice can be carried out on a routine level which makes this learning a necessary part of the work. The emphasis is on developmental learning with regard to critical reflection and alternative thinking in relation to your own beliefs and actions as well as to the information submitted to you or chosen by you. The main point is thus to learn to deal with complex situations and problems, where the first task is not to develop and propose a solution, but rather to identify and define the situation, task or problem (cp. Schön 1983, 1987). This requires, inter alia, that existing practices are questioned and reviewed, and new approaches developed and tested by an experimental approach that also includes participation in development work in order to change and improve the existing working system.

Development learning is thus basically an ability to go beyond the immediate task or situation and to put this in context, but also an emphasis on change of circumstances. This can also be seen as an expression of the kind of action and autonomy of practice in relation to prevailing patterns of thinking and perspectives, which makes it possible to discover new aspects of the world (Löfberg 2001).

Ellström (2005) describes a balance between the two forms of learning as a pendulum swinging between routine and reflection, a constant interaction between different levels of action, between two complementary aspects of a complicated learning process.

This distinction between two forms of learning is in part parallel to the distinction between "single-loop," and "double loop" learning by Argyris and Schön (1978), as well as to the distinction between reproductive and expansive learning by Engeström (1987, 2001).

According to Rolf (1993), practical knowledge is divided into know-how and competence. Know-how is the ability to solve problems and act properly, that is, in accordance with the guiding standard or existing rules, which can be taken for granted in action (Ryle 1962). Competence is know-how and the ability, through reflection or theory, to affect or change the rules of the game. Reflection on practice is considered as fundamental to the renewal of existing practice. Distance, problematization and critical analysis are combined with self-reflection as essential aspects of the professional role.

Ultimately, both for students and for employees the aim of learning in internship and for employability in the long run is the development of professional expertise; a professional competence that is based on the same concepts and abilities that are essential to academic

quality, namely scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection (Ellström 2005; Rolf 1993).

The question of whether and how or in which way the vocational elements can be incorporated into an academic discourse and in what way academic thinking can be firmly established in a practical context is of great importance here. How the students perceive the value and relevance of the concepts that are essential to academic quality, scientific foundation/ scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection for their internship and in what way the concepts are expressed during their internship is one way to apprehend this important question.

Method

The study was conducted in the department of Health Sciences in a Health Promotion and Education Programme at a Swedish University.

The students who participated in the study included 14 students, 13 female and 1 male, who finished their education spring 2006 and the interviews took place just before they graduated or just after. All students, 22 in number were invited to be interviewed. The 8 students, who did not participate, did not differ from the studied group in any relevant way.

All students were informed of the overall purpose of the study and the interview's design, content and structure and that participation was voluntary and that they had the possibility of withdrawing at any point in time.

The interview approach used was semi-structured. An interview guide was used that emphasized certain themes and which also contained core questions. The time taken for the interviews varied in length up to 1 hour.

The questions asked were about how the students perceived the value and relevance of the concepts that are essential to academic quality, scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection in their work-placed training period and in what way the concepts were expressed during their internship. The interviewer asked for clarification, to probe meanings and to encourage reflection. Interviews were brought to a close when both parties felt that they had revealed all that could be said about the conceptions.

The interviews were transcribed from the tape recordings and the responses were the object of a hermeneutic analysis with the purpose of acquiring general patterns in the responses of the

students. The point of departure was openness towards the material, to attempt to find and understand what lies beneath the surface and to go beyond the descriptive without abusing the text. I began my processing of the material by listening to all the interviews in their entirety.

Then I sorted the statements of the students as a sort of primary interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldböck 1994) before the actual analysis. The sorting involved my dividing up the interview statements in each individual interview into categories. I then read through the interview in its entirety to check that the statements were placed in the proper categories. Subsequently, the material in each category was concentrated.

I then read through each of the categories in their concentrated form with the purpose of finding structure in the statements of the students. The processing resulted in the appearance of a number of perceptions. The categorisations that both the fundamental questions resulted in and, after repeated re-readings of the individual interviews, emerged gradually as a number of variations or patterns that could be connected to the different perceptions. Variations that appeared in this part of the interpretation should not just be regarded as differences between the students as individuals, but as an expression of differences in approach or indications of the different contexts they found themselves in. In other contexts, different patterns could have developed in this way.

Results

The final interpretation resulted in five different patterns or categories emerging: *Undeveloped, separated, performance-oriented, oppositional and participatory*. The patterns are based on the two categories that emerged in the first part of the interpretation; how the students perceive the value and relevance of the concepts that are essential to academic quality, scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection for their internship and in what way the concepts are expressed during their internship.

Undeveloped

The concepts that are of importance to academic quality of a scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection seem to have little relevance among the students who are to be found in this pattern. They have difficulty verbalising its significance and when they do so the expression is for the most part vague and difficult to apprehend.

I cannot think of anything concrete, it is difficult to see the meaning of them (1)

can serve as an example of this.

This pattern is also distinguished by an apparent lack of awareness about the way the concepts are expressed during the internship.

Separated

In the separated pattern the concepts are characterized as irrelevant to the work-placed training. Theory and practice are separate and academic skills and abilities have little or no value or relevance to practical activities.

...so I felt that everything we've learned does not work out there anyway, was one of my feelings. 'What you learnt at school, it doesn't work here'. The second feeling was that what we have learnt at school is one extreme and what we have learnt in practice is another extreme (6)

and

A scientific and critical reflective approach, I had not much use of that in practice. Practice was more concrete and practical (3)

Here students give the impression that a scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection is almost invisible in practice.

..these concepts have remained at school so to speak. They have no place in practical realities (6)

For these students the concepts that are the core of higher education have very little meaning in practice and they are almost invisible to the students during their internship.

Performance-oriented

The academic concepts in the performance-oriented pattern are more related to performance and action than to criticism and reflection. Academic knowledge, in the form of the three concepts, is presented as key academic concepts, but their usability in practice is more instrumental. A more development-oriented approach is conspicuously absent. The following statement can be said to reflect this:

You can't just go by your feelings, what is cool and fun. It is about finding research and methods on these topics to work by for example when you do a survey, like I did (11)

Students are not talking in terms of change and development instead they are describing the relationship between the concepts and practice in a rather pragmatic way.

If she [the supervisor] came up with some proposals that we thought were good, then we could just carry it out [the job] (5)

The academic concepts become almost tools for doing the right thing and a reality that justifies action. Performance dominates over development.

In summary the relevance for the concepts that are of importance to academic quality of a scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection is about performance and the way they are expressed during internship is by action.

Oppositional

In the oppositional pattern the academic concepts are highlighted as legitimacy-building

These three concepts, significant for Higher Education, contribute to a certain status once we are out in practice. I learned so much new stuff, which I now that I am legitimated, can transmit to others (12)

Scientific foundation/scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection are described as tools to criticize and correct practice.

We were also very self-supporting and yet we felt secure in that "we know this". Those working in the field know absolutely nothing (4)

The students' own training and competence are seen as superior to those currently working in health promotion.

They have no training for it. My supervisor perceived directly that I had more skills than she had for her profession and she directly felt inferior to me. I do not think she did anything. She accomplished nothing. It was very different what she meant by effectively and what I think is effective. For her it was important to have many papers on her desk, to have a lot to do. While I believe that effective is when you manage to make something of it, to raise it one step further (13)

To summarise; in the oppositional pattern the relevance of the academic concepts is about legitimacy, and criticism and correction are the ways in which they are expressed during the internship.

Participatory

The participatory pattern is characterized by the idea that the academic concepts led to a greater degree of understanding of practice and the work that goes on there.

Otherwise I might not understand some things they did or why you did it in a certain way and how to work and so on. It provided a great opportunity to participate in and understand their conversation (8)

The students also feel that they are more competent to talk to "practitioners" and provide feedback and comments in a relevant way.

You participate in discussions and you comment and perhaps offer constructive criticism in a different way than if you had not embraced these [the academic concepts] (9)

In the participating pattern the students "use" the core conceptions to communicate with their supervisors and to relate in a communicative way with practice. In other words; academic knowledge makes the encounter with practice more valuable.

Summary

The relation of the patterns as to how the students perceived the relevance of the academic concepts to the internship and in what way the concepts are expressed during the internship is shown in table 1.

The differences are appreciable between the way the students perceive the concepts of a scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection that are the core of academic quality. With a point of departure in the reasoning that is conducted in theoretical points of departure the prerequisites for learning are probably also great. What these differences imply for the possibilities of the students to develop important knowledge, abilities and attitudes for future work is a question of the greatest importance to elucidate in further detail. This question will be emphasized in the following discussion.

Patterns	Relevance of academic concepts	Expression during internship
Undeveloped	Unclear/unclarified	Unclear/unclarified
Separated	Irrelevant	Invisible

Performance-oriented	Performance	Action
Oppositional	Legitimacy	Criticism and correction
Participatory	Understanding and dialogue	Discussion and feed back

Table 1. Patterns. The perceptions of the students about the relevance of the academic concepts for their internship and the way in which the concepts are expressed during the internship.

Discussion

The essential relation between academic theoretical knowledge and the knowledge, abilities and attitude that are required in practice is shown in several studies (Brennan 1982; Chalmers & Fuller 1996; Korthagen & Wubbels 1991). The core of academia and the demands from working life could consequently be seen as pointing in the same direction. For students to be employable in the long run they need to develop a diversity of skills that is essential to academic quality as well as to the professional role and work tasks. The study shows that this is rarely the case.

The pattern undeveloped is characterized by the notion that the concepts that are of importance to academic quality of scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection seem to have little relevance to the internship. There is a lack of connection between theoretical courses and the work-placed period which does not correspond with the views concerning the development of expertise described above. The work-placed experience does not function as a cross boundary between education and work. An important starting point for developing the prerequisites for professional expertise is consequently missing.

In the separated pattern the academic concepts are characterized as irrelevant to the internship. Academic skills and abilities have little or no value or relevance to practical activities. In this pattern students do not regard the working tasks as challenges and there is no need for special academic competence founded on a scientific basis, critical thinking and reflection. An integrated approach involving theorising practice, conceptualising practical experiences and developing self-regulative, meta-cognitive and reflective skills offers a more promising gateway towards the development of expertise (Leinhardt, McCarthy Young & Merriman 1995; Tynjälä 1999).

The performance-oriented pattern has great similarities with what Ellström (2005) calls learning at work - a production-oriented process; Engeström (1987, 2001) calls reproductive learning and Ryle (1962) calls “know-how”. Characteristic for this view on carrying out work is the importance of following given instructions and directives, to solve problems and act properly,

that is, in accordance with the guiding standard and you adapt to situations that occur. This pattern appears to be unfavourable with respect to the possibility of stimulating development-oriented learning (Ellström 2005), expansive learning (Engeström 1987, 2001) and professional competence (Rolf 1993). Critical reflection and alternative thinking, to learn to deal with complex situations and problems, abilities to go beyond the immediate task or situation and to put this in context combined with distance, problematization, critical analysis and self-reflection are essential aspects of the professional role. These fundamental concepts for academic quality are distinctly in the background in this pattern.

In the oppositional pattern the academic concepts are highlighted as legitimacy-building and scientific foundation/scholarly activity; critical thinking and reflection are described as tools to criticize and correct an inferior practice. According to Ellström (2005) it is important to have a developmental-learning emphasis on critical reflection and alternative thinking and that existing practices are questioned. Rolf (1993) points out distance, problematization and critical analysis combined with self-reflection as essential aspects of the professional role.

In this pattern however critical thinking and reflection is a way to look down on practice and the supervisors and self reflection seems to be absent. For the students in the oppositional pattern this appears to be a way to legitimize their own position as professionals in a new and ill-defined working field.

For professional competence to develop the students need to reflect on their work experiences and to examine them in the light of theoretical understanding and, respectively, to scrutinize theoretical knowledge in the light of practical work (Raelin 1997). They need to build a firm relation between theory and practice or science and work. In addition to students who are prepared for learning in practice, an activity is required that makes relevant learning possible as well as supervisors who stimulate reflection and critical thinking, and who, in addition, view this as a part of their professional role. In the oppositional pattern this seems to be missing.

The participatory pattern is characterized by the view that the academic concepts make the encounter with practice more valuable. The students “use” the core conceptions by relating in a communicative way with practice, to communicate with their supervisors and to come up with constructive criticism. This is well in line with what is essential for developing professional expertise, “a true integration of theoretical, practical and self-regulative knowledge” (Tynjälä

Välilmaa & Sarja 2003 s 155) and that the students' reflective and metacognitive skills are integrated with work and learning.

Conclusions

The question of whether and how or in which way the vocational elements can be incorporated into an academic discourse and in what way academic thinking can be firmly established in a practical context is propounded in this paper as being of great importance. How the students perceive the value and relevance of the concepts essential to academic quality; scientific foundation/ scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection in their internship is seen as one way to bring this important question to our notice.

This point of departure implies an integrated approach regarding theory and practice. By tradition, theory and practice have tended to be separated from each other and learnt in isolation and there has been a weak connection between theoretical courses and practice periods (Tynjälä, Välilmaa, & Sarja 2003). This traditional idea to separate two forms of knowledge does not correspond with the views regarding the development of expertise described for example by Ellström (2005), Engeström (1987, 2001) and Rolf (1993).

There is a danger that theory and practice will continue to be separated from each other. Therefore, it is important that when different forms of work-based learning in higher education are being developed this separation is prevented and that theoretical analysis and reflection on work experiences will become an essential part of education and work-based learning.

A greater interaction between theory and practice is consequently important for maintaining a better standard of education in higher education and for developing the prerequisites for professional expertise.

However, this requires that true integration of theoretical, practical and self-regulative knowledge takes place and that students really are allowed to solve complex and ill-defined problems during their work-based learning (WBL) periods. Practica should be seen as complex and challenging experiences, not because of the off-campus environment itself but because of the relevant and significant problems for the future professionals to resolve (Tynjälä, Välilmaa, & Sarja 2003, s 155).

According to Leinhardt, McCarthy Young & Merriman (1995) and Tynjälä (1999) an integrated approach involving theorising practice, conceptualising practical experiences and developing self-

regulative, meta-cognitive and reflective skills offers a more promising gateway towards the development of expertise. This integrated approach is a demanding task for the students as well as for the learning context at the university and for the practical activities at the workplace and the working supervisors. The result of the study indicates that, apart from in the participatory pattern integration is not “good enough”.

It would be easy to blame the student but an analysis of the result has to go further. Although good learning, whether directed at employability or not, depends on the quality of students’ general approaches and beliefs, there is a lot of evidence that approaches can be changed for the better by well-designed learning environments, programmes and practices (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Academic skills cannot only be developed through the course literature or by well-designed lectures, but also by the presence of academic conversation in an academic culture. For higher education to develop self-regulative, meta-cognitive and reflective skills there has to be a learning context that supports it, that does not just allow it but actually demands it. In addition to requirements to read the literature and to cope with exams in time, everyone should get the opportunity to mirror their knowledge in different perspectives and new contexts. It is only open systems, systems that allow conflicts and instability, which can change and grow. The rational conversation in which the best argument is valid is such a system. Therefore, it is necessary to make scientific discourse open to students.

A greater focus in schools on high-level thinking skills would go a long way toward making students productive learners and workers. By moving away from academic problems that are neatly defined and readily solvable towards more complex, real-life problems in the classrooms, teachers can better prepare students for the kinds of problems and expectations they will face in the workplace. Moreover, the connections between academic and real-life problems will become clear.

In addition to students who are prepared for learning in practice, an activity is required that makes relevant learning possible as well as supervisors who stimulate reflection and critical thinking, and who, in addition, view this as a part of their professional role. In an earlier study (Karlsson 2010) regarding the field supervisor in the Health Promotion and Education Programme at Kristianstad University this was however shown not be the case.

To summarise; this study shows that there seems to be no strong prerequisite for the students to develop professional expertise. For this to happen there has to be an increased interaction between theory and practice which must affect both learning on campus and learning at work. Learning is not automatically good. The learning context could lead to the breakdown of competence rather than that its development. This could be the case irrespective of if it is about learning on campus or in the working place.

The interaction between theory and practice respective learning on campus and different forms of work-based learning is important issues when it comes to employability and preparing students for future work tasks. How the students perceive the value and relevance of the concepts essential to academic quality; scientific foundation/ scholarly activity, critical thinking and reflection in their internship is one way to try to throw light upon this important field. Obviously there is a lot more to study in this area. To follow up this study; are the students in the participatory pattern also more employable in the sense that they actually master their work better after they graduate? And to widen the context; are more established study programmes regarding internship and work-based learning, such as teacher education and nursing “better off” or do they have similar problems about the prerequisites for professional expertise? To invite others to study this and other related questions more in depth is my final point in this article.

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