

BALANCING WORK AND STUDY, THE INTER-RELATIONS OF PROFESSIONALS, INDUSTRY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

*Tzu-Bin Lin, Jonathan Wardle & Richard Berger,
The Centre for Excellence in Media Practice,
Bournemouth University.*

INTRODUCTION

Background

This report is a case study of the experiences of skilled professionals returning to higher education institutions (HEIs) to study whilst working in creative media businesses. It is based on a work-based masters programme, the MA in Creative Media Practice (MACMP), delivered by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) at Bournemouth University¹. CEMP was awarded its status in 2004 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and is the only HEFCE funded Centre for Excellence in media education in the UK. In order to maintain the UK's place as a leader in the global creative industry, CEMP aims to provide innovative training and learning opportunities informed by pedagogic research.

The MACMP programme is not only work-based

but also aimed at providing an online, flexible learning environment for professionals with significant work experience in creative and media industries. It is designed to be studied part-time over fifteen months. Considerable commitment from students and the support of employers are required. The programme is now in its third year of operation and has enrolled 40 students. The first intake has successfully completed their course and fulfilled the requirements.

Students undertaking the MACMP come from various disciplines including marketing, journalism, animation, television production and web development a diverse group of professionals but with a common interest in creative media. The programme is delivered completely online, through a series of work-based projects and reflective activities. It offers scope for exploring how the internet enables new learning through technology based on a model of social constructionism², and how such a model is experienced by students who are also working in professional contexts.

Aims of this study

This report discusses a study investigating work-based learners' experiences of balancing study and work, in particular the tension between them and their

¹ For further information on the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice see: www.cemp.ac.uk, for further information on the MACMP, see: onlineservices.bournemouth.ac.uk/courses/course.aspx?course=185 (accessed 08.06.10).

² Social constructivism takes the view that knowledge is not neutral but is socially constructed, through interactions between different social groups. So, for social constructivists, reality is shaped by individuals through such interactions. For more see *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Alan Bullock & Stephen Trombley, 2000) and the *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (David Macey, 2004).

³ This report, in common with all the research and reports in the Stepping Out series were started and completed prior to the general election of 2010.

employer. The role of new media such as the internet is another focus. The issue of how new media technology has changed pedagogic practices in all aspects of education is contentious. With strong support from the previous government³, the number of reports on new media/Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education has grown (DfES, 2003a). Updating software, buying new hardware, introducing new online learning platforms and training staff are common developments in universities. There has been a commonly held view that new technology provides an ‘ultimate’ pedagogy that fits all learners. This case study provided much needed insight on that view.

The aims of this study were:

- To explore why professionals want to return to higher education;
- To explore the perceived benefits and limitations of work-based learning programmes;
- To show how professionals can be better supported by employers while they learn;
- To examine the role of new media technology in this context.

A series of questions were developed based on these aims and on the relevant literature. Finally, this

study illustrates what is required of HEIs if they are to meet the needs of working professionals in terms of communicating the benefits of higher education to potential work-based students and their employers, developing content, and delivering programmes.

Little research has been completed in the field of work-based learning (WBL) in media studies related programmes (see Boud & Solomon, 2001; Garnett, Costley & Wrokman, 2009). This research is able to provide insights to WBL programmes for professionals in the creative media industries and can be used to make comparisons with WBL in other professional areas such as computing science and health care (for details see Garnett, Costley & Wrokman, 2009).

This report is divided into four parts: a review of relevant issues on work-based, lifelong learning and the online learning debate. Then, a section focuses on the methodological issues of the study, followed by findings and discussion. The conclusion presents the overall contributions that this study may have for broader debate.

WORK-BASED AND ONLINE LEARNING

As the UK moves increasingly towards a more knowledge-based economy and HEIs devise new

lifelong learning and continuing professional development (CPD) strategies and programmes (Burnet & Smith, 2000; Parker, 2006). There is a need for research into learners' experiences, many of which arise in non-traditional learning and teaching contexts, for example via an online platform or through apprenticeships. The result is that both the students and the mode of learning are likely to be significantly different from conventional full-time courses delivered on campus. The issues faced by students on such courses may be significantly different from the experiences of conventional undergraduates, or even full-time post-graduate students. These students must be able to balance study with professional work and personal commitments⁴.

The Leitch Review (2006) set a target of 40% of the population aged between 19 and state pension age being qualified to level 4 (degree level) or above by 2020. However with 70% of the 2020 workforce having already left compulsory education, it is clear that to achieve this. Significant numbers of the existing work-force will have to return to formal education, in all likelihood as work-based learners and, in order for this to happen universities must develop a better understand what working professionals need from HE

and indeed what HE is able to offer them and their industries. This issue covers at least two dimensions: lifelong and work-based learning.

The importance of work-based and lifelong learning

Boud & Solomon (2001: 4) define work-based learning (WBL) as: “a class of university programmes that brings together universities and work organizations [sic] to create new learning opportunities in work places.” Based on this, there are, at least, two types of work-based learning: one is learning in the workplace, which is viewed as ‘a learning vehicle’ (Murdoch, 2004: 123); the other is learning while working where the learning content may improve working performance. The latter approach guides the operation of MACMP. MACMP works with creative and media practitioners in their own professional practice. Students follow a negotiated route through the programme that maps onto their own professional objectives. It is envisaged that each student will become a leader, within their own organisation, who can identify issues and provide solutions. This ‘attitude’ becomes part of a bigger project of lifelong and continuous professional development (Shaw & Green, 1999) as WBL becomes

⁴ We recognise that many full-time students work to support their studies. However the work/study balance of experience professionals undertaking work-based learning are likely to be of a different order.

part of the broader lifelong learning initiative (Edwards & Nicoll, 2001).

Proposed in 1998 and 1999, lifelong learning has been a continuing focus by government, the public and researchers (Jary, 2008). Human capital is one of the key terminologies in the lifelong learning discourse. How do people become more competitive in the job market? How does a nation continue to prosper in the global economy? Lifelong learning is one of the solutions supported by (previous) governments. Edwards & Nicoll (2001) argue initiatives like this offer a persuasive text but in reality it do not work well.

Boud, Solomon & Symes (2001) states that WBL represent new practices for higher education in changing times and have identified five types of WBL: learning through work, dealing with dislocation, meeting the needs of performance and recognition, addressing organisational priorities and, flexible professional development. MACMP aims to provide flexible professional development and learning through work for professionals from the broad range of creative media industries, the course outline states⁵: “The course aims to enhance your professional practice so that projects you are involved with at work form part of the evidence for a postgraduate qualification.

Thus, your work time contributes to the requirements of the course and what you learn immediately improves your working practice”.

It is a clear in indicating that work and learning are combined in professional practices providing more attractions to its target audience, the professionals.

The flexibility of online learning

The Department for Education and Skills (2003b) placed emphasis on the e-learning/online learning field of education, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) also states, there is a “need to help institutions take a more proactive approach to innovation in learning and teaching, and a more strategic approach to managing the consequential change and risk, including technological risk” (cited from Steinberg, 2004: 187). The HEFCE report responds to the DfES’s grand vision of e-learning/online learning and points out that HEIs have to prioritise this issue.

Key features of online learning include flexibility and accessibility (NCVER, 2003). A virtual learning environment can provide a space to learn with a range of accessibility options in terms of time and place. There is no need to be in the same lecture room or even in the university building as the teacher or other students.

⁵ Extracted from: onlineservices.bournemouth.ac.uk/courses/Course.aspx?course=185&page=course_information.

Furthermore, unlike conventional teaching methods like lectures and seminars which are fixed in the timetable, online learning can be asynchronous, allowing learners to access teaching at times best suited to them. With the increasing broadband access in UK households and businesses, access to online learning materials is becoming much more efficient. In response to HEFCE and DfES, many HEIs have now started offering online programmes at various levels (of qualification). MACMP is one of them. Assisted by new technology, a well-designed online forum provides professionals with both flexibility and accessibility so that they can manage their work and study. An ideal vision of a tailor-made programme of study is proposed where teacher and learner negotiate a study programme to meet personal needs. The MACMP course outline explains the benefit of online learning:

“Using the latest online technologies you will be able to negotiate study with your tutor ensuring that the outcomes are relevant to your needs, fashioning the course to suit your personal requirements within your own work environment.”

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES:

The participants

Nine MACMP students agreed to be interviewed as part of the study. They included a digital director, a creative director, a computer animator, a marketer, a sales manager, a graphic designer, a managing editor and two freelancers. The interviewees were chosen from different cohorts so that a picture can be presented based on those who have already completed the programme, those who are currently doing it and those who are about to embark on it.

Data collection

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview method was chosen to because it provided a good opportunity to interact with students and to extract their experiences. Interview data is the outcome of human interactions and is not like that obtained from documents and visual images, which are external to individuals (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The interviews were between 15 minutes to 40 minutes long, depending on the responses from interviewees. The interviews were recorded. Interviews also allowed for students' broader life-world such as their

work and the support of their employers to be explored.

The interviews were analysed in the context key themes:

- The students' motivation for returning to HE;
 - The benefits and limitations of this type of MA programme;
 - The support from employers while studying;
- Students' views about the role of new technology in their learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

Lifelong learning and WBL: The motivation for returning to HE

As lifelong learning and WBL have been widely promoted by governments and their agencies, the terms, at least, are familiar to the public. Learning is viewed as personal investment as suggested in the lifelong learning discourse. The interviews evidence that people are influenced by this discourse – or more precisely, persuaded by it. The major reason for returning to education is to seek better career opportunities and to make themselves more employable. Some of the interviewees described their motivation:

“My motivation was to increase my employment prospects”, freelance media practitioner.

“I needed to be able to increase my academic abilities within my own sphere”, freelance media practitioner.

“I’d just come out of the games’ industry. I had a year out to see what other opportunities I could find”, Digital Director.

“I’d been out of education for a while and because in my job there are so many of us I think it’s just to set myself above the others a bit more, you know, just another sort of level higher, because there are so many people with a degree. I think it was just to try and sort of better myself, I suppose, to set my head above other people”, Graphic Designer.

A common theme is clear from these responses: students consider that doing a masters degree will enhance their prospects in the job market or their current workplace. To some who are self-employed, having a masters degree seemed to benefit their practice and make them more competitive in the market.

“Why did I do it? I think it was because I was self taught in design, I decided to try and just get a little bit more experience and add a bit more weight to my qualifications”, Creative Director.

“I wanted to increase my knowledge. I’ve got my own business and I wanted to inform my practice”, Sales Manager.

Freelancers and those who are self-employed believe that the qualification will offer benefits. They see learning as an investment in their human capital and an opportunity to increase their employability. However, personal as well as professional development was cited as a key reason for returning to HE. One interviewee said that “when I engage with learning, it is a catalyst for other areas of my life” whilst another said that returning to education is “to push myself”.

Based on our interviews, we would argue that promotion of lifelong learning and WBL by governments and their agencies has impacted on professionals and steered them back to HEIs as a site of learning. Although the discourse of lifelong learning is not as clear as Edwards & Nicoll suggested it has implicit influences on people and it is the right for HEIs to pay attention to these kinds of programmes and to offer courses for professionals who would like to study through WBL.

Flexibility, accessibility, prestige and other reasons of taking a WBL programme

Besides self-motivation, what brings these professionals back to HE to sign up for a course like MACMP? The issue of flexibility is crucial to professionals and one dimension of WBL is the offer

of flexible, accredited programmes (Boud & Solomon, 2001). Flexibility in MACMP derives not only from part-time study but from its various combinations of theory and practice-based modules.

“Because it was very flexible and it fitted with me being able to continue working while studying. And to do a course that was appropriate for my practice because that masters course was very practice orientated, that wasn’t removed from my practice. Because when you’re working from home and you’re studying for a Masters there’s a lot of work involved. So I felt that if I could do something that supported and added to my current practice.” freelance media practitioner.

“I liked the fact that you could fit it in alongside your work”, Sales Manager.

The flexibility of integrating current work practices and learning attracts professionals. They do not need to take a break from work and what they are learning is immediately enhancing their current practices. The design of the programme is key to achieving this. MACMP has three main sections: ‘Retrospective’, ‘Current Practice’ and ‘Future Developments and Opportunities’. At the end of each section, students can choose if they would like to continue different

levels of learning and attainment: to a masters degree, postgraduate diploma or postgraduate certificate.

Another interviewee pointed out that the biggest attraction of MACMP is accessibility. With the advent of new technology, instruction has changed and online and distance learning offer easily accessed learning.

“Because it was being offered online ... it seemed much more accessible”, Digital Director.

“... I was able to do it remotely. I didn’t have to relocate. I have a family here... it was a cheaper option than having to go and move to the actual city where the course was being held. So the idea of it being remote was kind of perfect,” Marketer.

The advantage of having both flexibility and accessibility is also mentioned:

“It’s because it’s distance learning, because I could do it whilst I was working... I don’t have the money and I don’t have the time to give up my job and then go and do a full time course. So it was purely that it was flexible and I could do it while I was working and that was ideal,” Graphic Designer.

Alongside flexibility, and accessibility interviewees suggested there are other advantages:

“... my husband works away a lot, so it’s not very easy with two small children to actually be able

to attend any physical classes. So it was a very attractive prospect with it being online, so I could do it from anywhere. And also Bournemouth Uni has a good reputation for that kind of thing, so I was quite excited about going to that university. I liked the idea that the course was for practitioners, for actual people working in the area rather than just students. I thought it would be a really good opportunity to learn from other professionals and not just from the lecturers,” Computer Animator.

“I saw it advertised, I did some research, so I went to the website, Bournemouth website, and I read about it. I asked a friend of mine who worked in higher education, about Bournemouth’s reputation, MACMP’s reputation, and he said it was excellent and highly recommended it. And then, when I applied for the course, what I liked about it as well, business element, was the fact that I could bring modules of it into my workplace, and so it would then enhance my understanding of he workplace,” Graphic Designer.

Professionals chose MACMP not only for its flexibility but because of the reputation of the University and particularly because of its strong reputation for media education. Other factors affecting choice are the flexibility to balance study with domestic

life, match in the aims of learning with professional practice and opportunity to learn from expert peers.

Our interviews show that the programme has to be presented in a way that is compatible with the discourse of lifelong learning and WBL and needs to be clear how it combines flexibility and accessibility. Professionals more readily engage with programmes that have connections with a credible 'brand' and are delivered by a prestigious department or centre.

The benefits and limitations of online WBL

Those who are about to start the MACMP may have different ideas and expectations from those in the middle of their journey or those who have completed the programme. However, there are some common themes that can be extracted from the different viewpoints, particularly that the course provides access to contemporary and relevant knowledge of creative and media industry developments.

“The benefits were that I actually get to understand it [the industry], very quickly, after the very first paper... the benefit was seeing it emerge and actually getting a really good understanding of why your industry had formed the way it had and that was fantastic. The actual level of the knowledge was

absolutely incredible,” Marketer.

“The benefits are ... it’s opened up information or books to me or research areas which I never knew existed and I’ve loved that and reading and finding out about areas which I wouldn’t normally have the chance to read... I feel that it’s added enormous ability for me to be able to make more reasoned decisions based on an expanding knowledge base,” freelance media practitioner.

MACMP provides knowledge of the industry and opportunities for students to critically reflect on their own practice. This has practical benefit as it makes an impact and improvement on their practice.

“... a lot of the course [MACMP] is about reflecting on my practice, see what I was doing, why I was doing it and, you know, and then, from that reflection, considering places where I could make improvements and then coming up with ways to make improvements and implementing them and then reflecting upon those implementations... that was really positive because it helped me understand exactly how my practice worked and what it was that I was doing when I went out into the field every day in terms of relationships with customers and the way I portrayed myself,” freelance media practitioner.

“I think, because I do a lot of projects linked to

the job I think that [MACMP] helped me at work as well because I took on extra things that I probably wouldn't have thought about taking on in my job... it made me more involved in what I was doing within my organisation and I got to do things that they possibly hadn't thought about, because I did a project on disability which is something we hadn't looked at within my job, but it was something very important for me to look at within my job," Graphic Designer.

There are clear indications that a successful WBL programme offers a balanced combination of knowledge and critical reflection on that knowledge, related to personal work practices. In the case of MACMP, the course content brings new insights and approaches into professionals' practices. Interviewees highlight that reflective activity was seen as the core element of MACMP. This was the intention when CEMP designed the programme. MACMP is structured around coursework that requires learners to organise their own learning processes and to ensure their study integrates with their daily professional practices.

"The benefits? I liked the way the course was structured, so it was a small piece of coursework followed by bigger ones and in units. So it did come in easily digested chunks, which I thought was useful.

It made sense, it sort of hung together well," Computer Animator.

"I liked the fact that it's not prescriptive... [that] there's a core there, that you're obviously following a path, but you could actually adapt it to suit particular elements of your own practice. So you weren't studying something that was abstract, that you couldn't apply to your practice," Sales Manager.

These comments illustrate that diverse coursework makes the learning process easier for professionals to follow and offers a useful way of learning. Various pieces of well-designed coursework that can be carried out in reasonable hours form a meaningful and useful basis of knowledge-generation.

For those who have completed the course, 'a sense of achievement' is another positive comment. After 15-months of hard work, these professionals feel a high level of achievement:

"I suppose there's a sense of achievement in finishing it. I guess, in the long run, it may help me when it comes to competing for jobs in the future. It [MACMP] was very challenging, at times quite stressful and difficult, but at the end of the day it was very rewarding" Creative Director.

"Don't take it [MACMP] on lightly, you know, have

a good think. It's probably some of the best work I've ever done. ... Well, I can't say it's given me the benefits yet because I haven't seen them, but I like to think that, you know, doing the MA has been, it's going to be very, very beneficial to me in the future," Marketer.

These comments suggest this programme is challenging and although most of the feedback is positive, one interviewee expressed that MACMP is far more time-consuming than originally expected.

"The course was more hours than I anticipated and, if I'm honest, more hours than was kind of advised to me really. But I think if you probably tell everybody exactly how it is you wouldn't get anybody on the course. You know, so I think it's more really than part time. It seemed to take over 50/50 of my work, I was maybe expecting, you know, 20% of the time," Sales Manager.

Striking a balance between working and learning hours is an important and challenging aspect of designing WBL programmes. Different learners have different learning patterns and different working patterns. The hours suggested by the programme team are approximate and learners need to be aware of that there might be differences for individuals.

There are limitations identified by interviewees. Online learning means there is no face-to-face activity. This, in

turn drives the need for higher levels of peer interaction.

"Sometimes it's quite isolating, because you are on your own... That's quite weird really to think that you've never actually been there. We made an effort between us to speak to each other on the course and that was lovely and I think if, I mean we all met up at the start of the course, apart from obviously there was a couple, one guy from South Africa clearly couldn't... if there was some way you could have the odd conversation or meet up like we did, or even a webcam," Computer Animator.

A number of interviewees also expressed frustration that it was difficult to engage their work colleagues and line managers in their studies.

Sometimes it's hard for one's colleagues to be fully engaged with what one's doing. I've had some interesting conversations almost, if I'm very excited about learning about something or reading about something... it doesn't interest them [my colleagues], they don't care. So I've got no one to share that experience with sometimes... So I find that frustrating," freelance media practitioner.

These comments reveal that taking an online WBL programme might be a quite lonely process. It is difficult to share the learning experience with your

peers, be they fellow students or work colleagues. An online forum can sometimes seem impersonal and further investigation and design needs to be undertaken to address this. However, overall, the feedback for MACMP is encouraging and shows that this WBL programme is largely able to fulfil, and sometimes exceed, the expectations of professionals.

Lack of support from employers

The involvement of employers in WBL programmes is important. However, often the employers of our interviewees do not show a sufficient interest in encouraging and supporting their employees in their professional development. Employers appear to find it difficult to see WBL in terms of professional rather than personal development. Only two interviewees had strong support from their employers, for example, one received financial support.

“Well, full support really, financial [support]. I mean I had to pay so much but then that would be recouped once I’d passed. So there was kind of support there and there was full support because I think what they see is they see the obvious advantage of ... adding something to the work that you do day in and day out,” Digital Director.

New technology

The Virtual learning environment (VLE) replaced conventional synchronous, on-campus learning. A multi-function forum offers accessibility through the VLE to professionals based in various parts of the UK and some, in other countries. These professionals do not need to go to a lecture theatre every week. However, some professionals had not used this technology before and encountered difficulties at the beginning.

“Obviously I think it [the online forum] is very good for communication, although before the course I did not use the internet a lot. But since the course I use the internet all the time and I don’t enjoy it, but I understand why it’s very important... I had never been on a forum prior to the course. So I didn’t even know how to interact. But after a little while I became used to it, maybe by my third assignment, I was happy to use the forum and I was contributing a lot more and I understood the ways that you communicate on the forum and how to get my messages across clearly. And then it became very useful,” freelance media practitioner.

For those unfamiliar with the VLE, learning how to use it and the interaction on the forum is a bonus.

However, others consider that the online environment lacks the benefits of more personal interaction.

“It’s a really good platform. It’s a bit lonely when you’re in the thick of it. It’s not immediate, so there’s a lot of input, always, always, a lot of reading ... and then you’re writing to do, to communicate with people,” Marketer.

“I can type to people but I’m not interacting really with people. If I do it’s on this forum and I’m scrolling up and down. And then the posts log up and you don’t know which post to go to sometimes. And then it’s five pages long the post, and that’s sometimes not very intuitive, from a social media perspective it’s not really interactive,” freelance media practitioner.

There are challenges to using a VLE. Unlike new undergraduate students many of whom are ‘digital natives’ for whom new communications technologies are part of their everyday world, some of the professionals on MACMP are from a generation for whom these technologies are not the ‘natural’ way to communicate. They need to be supported in learning how to manage and learn in this environment. The interface between students sometimes lack fluidity and there is clearly a need to examine other interfaces to typing into forums.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

Professionals return to higher education for WBL because they are looking for better job prospects, to increase their competitiveness in the job market and to pursue personal development. Responses in our interviews suggest correspondence to rhetoric on WBL and lifelong learning developed by governments and their agencies. In other words, professionals are influenced by the public discussion on WBL. Other factors impacting on decisions to do a masters programme are: flexibility, accessibility and the prestige of the programme provider. Deciding to re-engage with education can be a complicated decision-making process.

MACMP fulfils various features of WBL programmes such as offering knowledge and structured opportunities for critical reflection on professional practice, and flexible design of curriculum. However, these professionals did not get as much support from their employers as they would have liked. It is clear that employers do not yet see the potential for WBL for professional development tending to view it as personal development, that is, more likely to benefit the individual (the recipient) than the business enterprise in which they work.

The application of internet technology has not yet fulfilled the grand vision of MACMP. Although the online forum is generally recognised as a useful medium of learning, there is still a requirement for greater and more fluid interaction between learners. This is another aspect that requires further research and there has not been a perfect online learning platform or method that meets the needs of diverse learners. Overall, this case study provides valuable findings of the WBL programme in the creative media industries whilst raises some issues requiring further investigation.

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