Aspect O: placement learning

Placement learning (PL), often referred to as practice learning by a number of professional bodies, covers a wide spectrum of curricular approaches in which learners are placed into a work context. PDP is a process that can enable, support and record learning in the work or practice context and help the learner make links to academic study and university approaches. See also Aspect P: work-based learning.

Self-assessment questions

Key strategic questions are highlighted.

Purposes of the PDP record in PL

O1   What purposes will the PDP record serve in PL? Are they related to academic outcomes, learning through practice, generic skills, personal growth, or employer tasks?

O2   Who identifies the students' learning needs on placement (for example students, employers, university, professional body), and how are they identified (for example audit, test, self review)?

Q3   What role can PDP have in identifying students' learning outcomes and placement opportunities?

O4   How are placement opportunities organised to develop and measure soft, generic skills and 'distance travelled'?

Using PDP to assess and record learning on placement in the PDP

O5   How is learning on placement measured and captured in the PDP record or portfolio?

O6   How are achievements on placement recorded in the PDP? What is in the PDP portfolio (for example action plans, evidence of learning, reflective journals, links between theory and practice, references to literature)?

O7   Who monitors progress: in the placement; provides formative comments on the PDP; assesses practice; assesses theory; assesses reflection; assesses praxis; and ensures learning experiences map to required criteria?

O8   Does the function and operation of PDP on placement differ from its use on campus?

Implementation

O8   How is the process of using PDP on placement implemented and managed?

O9   How is PDP used to identify appropriate situations for placement and/or learning situations in placement?

O10 What roles do key stakeholders (for example student, peers, workplace supervisor, university tutor) play in finding learning opportunities, providing support, giving feedback and gathering evidence during placement?

O11 How is the use of PDP on placement evaluated and quality assured? [See also Aspect C: evaluation, review and quality enhancement.]

Commentary

Work placements and placement learning

Jackson (2006) defines work placement as:

> a work context, for the purpose of intentional learning that is relevant to the aims and intended learning outcomes of a higher education programme or module, into which a learner is placed or places themselves. By 'work' we mean paid/unpaid employment or, in certain programme contexts, self-employment.

The range of PL

Placement learning or practice learning opportunities take many forms (Jackson, 2006). Examples include the following:

- students are sent out on placement, for example school, social work setting where they practice professional competences
- students take an internship module where they find a work placement and undertake general employability skills
- law students take a placement as pupils in a law firm
- medical undergraduates work in hospital wards and rotate through several specialties
- professionals undertake CPD which may involve working within the field.

PL may also include observational experience involving shadowing to understand what people do and how they behave in their particular work roles (for example for a student at an early stage on their professional programme). Students in their final year may 'fulfil a role', taking responsibility for planning and implementing activities aimed at developing competence within complex work situations.

In all these contexts, learners may be supported and assessed by university staff or workplace staff or both. **The PDP process can assist in identifying student needs, planning, encouraging reflection on learning while on placement and recording evidence for assessment.**

Employee-learners using their own work context for professional learning are considered under Aspect P: work-based learning.

Curriculum design

The role of PDP in relation to PL varies with different curriculum designs. Some curricula place strong emphasis on the enhancement of the reflective practitioner (for example professional subjects, such as nursing)

while others focus on the development of skills within a work context (for example policing studies). In both these situations the PDP can play a useful role in making links between theory and practice.

The student can use the PDP tool to audit existing skills, identify needs and to create action plans to meet development needs. Some of these may be explicitly linked to module outcomes or course requirements while others may be personal and private. The PDP allows for all and they can be revisited and modified at any time.

The university team will probably have clear expectations and specifications of what should be achieved by a student on placement. These could include:

- specific learning outcomes

- generic learning outcomes

- use of prescribed templates and processes

- dialogue with the student to personalise the experience

- evidence of student's learning

- evidence of student's reflection

- comments from the placement supervisor.

The placement provider may view the student as:

- an addition to the workforce

- someone who is very new and cannot be trusted with real aspects

- a potential future employee or colleague who is part of the profession.

It is important for the university staff and the placement staff to discuss and communicate the purposes and uses of PDP as:

- an assessment tool for the university

- a progress and planning tool for the student

- a method of planning, monitoring and resource allocation for the placement provider.

To facilitate this, many universities have placement agreements which attempt to clarify the expectations of all parties. The PDP element is often seen as a repository for reflective process recordings which form the basis of support and supervision conversations between students and academic and placement staff.

The placement provider may have the same concerns as university staff raised in Aspect E: engaging academic staff, but problems may be magnified due to workplace tutors coming from different backgrounds.

The value of PDP in stimulating reflection on PL

In addition to being a useful planning tool, PDP can enhance the learning and reflection that occur during and after placement. The PDP process can be a key to facilitating reflection for, in, and on practice, that is, anticipatory planning, thinking on your feet

and critical retrospective analysis. Much of the literature refers to a portfolio but in many cases this is a structured document rather than an extensive repository.

Jones (2010) discusses the process for special needs teachers:

> The complex task of selecting, annotating and reflecting on evidence required [them] to make explicit aspects of their own theory of practice, and examine that in light of their practice and their understanding of the literature that they had engaged with during the PDP. ...the portfolio can be seen to be an effective instrument for both knowledge creation and utilisation, and the reflective processes can be seen to be activating positive engagement.

NHS Education for Scotland (2010) describes how:

> the portfolio will allow the practitioner to show competencies have been achieved and standards met, as well as facilitating critical thinking and promoting reflection.

Corkhill (2006) investigated attitudes to PDP in placement in Foundation Degrees. The relationship between the two processes was variable, ranging from full integration through using PDP to prepare for placement to no overt connection (see also Table 7 on page 82). There were cases of confusion between these two opportunities for learning 'the apparent premise being that if you did one you did not need the other' (p 37).

The University of Glasgow (2009) explains that:

> PDP provides the student with a means by which to help raise and build aspirations and to focus or reflect on the achievement of attributes, skills and understandings.... The process should continue the journey that the student began prior to HE entry...and then be carried beyond HE into the graduate's professional life...through Continuing Professional Development.

Assessment

The PDP record may also be used as an assessment tool. As it is so personal and individual it is more likely to lead to deep learning than many other methods of assessment. Juleff (2004-05) reported on assessment for financial services students on placement:

> The precise nature of the tasks undertaken by each student will vary depending upon the type of organisation in which they are placed. ...all portfolios contain a mixture of job specific, personal and programme related outcomes (these are weighted to give 30%, 30% and 40% of the final portfolio mark respectively). ...the portfolios include a tutor assessment, an assessment by the line manager and self assessment by the student of their performance. The latter is designed to encourage the type of reflective practice that will be useful to the students in their future studies and careers.

Advice to community nurses (NHS Education for Scotland, 2008) states that:

> Evidence in the portfolio can take many formats, but essential will be the inclusion of reflection on personal development. Some examples of evidence of learning include:
>
> - a report or study you have produced as part of your learning activity
> - a diary of learning with analysis of learning
> - letters confirming your achievements
> - direct observation by an expert of you performing a specific activity
> - significant event analysis.
>
> Throughout the process of portfolio development the practitioner should seek regular support from both the education supervisors and practice based facilitators. The supervisors and facilitators can also provide advice on the acceptability of evidence.

It is important to recognise that a PDP record can have 'public' and 'private' elements and students need to be clear which items they wish to share and with whom.

Social learning

A major aspect of placement learning is the social and cultural context. The learner must fit in with local traditions, work as part of a team and contribute to a community of practice. These soft skills are important for employability and relevant learning outcomes can be incorporated into PDP. This is normally by the student's initial self-assessment followed by witness statements from workplace colleagues or line manager accompanied by a reflective account from the learner.

As Rowden (2007, p 60) explains:

> The concepts of teamwork and communities of practice emphasize the socio-cultural conditions specific to the work environment. The immersion... in the collective knowing process that can be characterized as interdependent and mutually shaping moves the focus from the individual learner to the social dimension of learning.

Time

The student needs time for a variety of activities and the placement should allow for these, although this can be a difficult balancing act within a real work context. Notional student effort linked to credit-bearing modules needs to include time for:

- induction and familiarisation
- identifying needs and action planning
- practice and making mistakes
- receiving feedback
- reflection and making links between theory and practice

- creating and recording evidence
- meeting supporters and assessors
- doing authentic tasks.

Several of these aspects will be enhanced by the use of the PDP process and frameworks.

Aspect of PL	Role of PDP
identifying needs	audit tools
action planning	learning agreements
reflection	journal, blog
links between theory and practice	journal, reports
creating and recording evidence	storage; record of competence, assessments; portfolio; CV
self assessment	audit tools, reflective journal
process recordings	self assessment
course assessment	match to learning outcomes
summary of learning	selection and distillation of evidence for different purposes

Table 7: the relationships between PDP and aspects of PL.

The university needs to ensure the placement provider understands all the requirements and that the PDP process and formats can be used within the placement to enhance the development of practice skills. The templates could be discussed by the university staff and placement supporters in advance of any student involvement.