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'Simultaneous Immersion': How online postgraduate study contributes to the development of reflective practice among public service practitioners[1]

By **Sally Brooks[2]** and **Ellen Roberts[3]**

Abstract

This paper examines how the process of engaging simultaneously in study and work – through online distance-based study – affects students' capacity to apply their learning in and for the workplace. The paper takes as its starting point the importance of extending notions of 'educational effectiveness' beyond course-based attainment' to encompass the impact of learning within the workplace (Johnson and Thomas 2004). It explores the interface between study and work, focusing on the case of online postgraduate programmes in public management at the University of York. It finds that simultaneous immersion in study and work can create the conditions for 'public reflection' (Raelin 2008) that underpin work-based learning; and that a key factor is the student-practitioner's ability to mobilise 'episodic power' (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008). The paper suggests ways in which existing approaches to online postgraduate learning might be enhanced in order to capitalise on these conditions of simultaneous immersion.

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[2] Sally Brooks is Lecturer in International Development, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York. Email: sally.brooks@york.ac.uk

[3] Ellen Roberts is Director, Online Masters Programmes in Public Management, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York. Email: ellen.roberts@york.ac.uk

Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine how the process of engaging simultaneously in study and work – made possible by online distance-based study that is carried out alongside work – affects students' capacity to apply their learning in and for the workplace.

The paper takes as its starting point Johnson and Thomas's (2004: 302) argument about the importance of extending notions of 'educational effectiveness' beyond attainment in coursework or examinations to encompass the impact of their learning within the workplace. It explores dynamics at the interface between study and the workplace, focusing on the case of online postgraduate study for mid-career professionals, and suggests ways in which existing approaches might be enhanced in order to capitalise on the unique features of online postgraduate learning. The paper's hypothesis is that the dynamics and outcomes of work-study interaction enabled by online study might be a distinctive contribution of this type of Masters study; and that this potential contribution could be enhanced if its dimensions and enablers were more fully understood.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section sets out our conceptual approach, which is organised around three key elements. The first element is the individual student-practitioner. Here we draw on Schon's (1999) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' to explore the processes involved in individual learning. The second element builds on this individual perspective by examining reflective practice within the workplace, drawing on two ideas in particular: Raelin's (2008) concepts of 'work-based learning' and 'public reflection' (Raelin 2001). The third element in the framework is the organisational context itself, and in particular the ways in which this context enables or

constrains the application of learning. Here we draw on Easterby–Smith et al.'s (2008) 'process perspective' on absorptive capacity and the role, in this, of different types of power.

The following section draws on a pilot study carried out with a group of ten participants (purposively selected from a total population of 216 students and 350 alumni) in online (distance) masters programmes in public management offered by the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York and intended for mid-career public service practitioners. The focus of this pilot study was not on online learning *per se*, however but rather as a mode of learning that enables what we call 'simultaneous immersion' in work and study, While there has been considerable research into how to promote reflection and learning *within* courses of online study (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2005) less attention has been paid to date to the relationship between online learning and its application within the workplace. It is this relationship that the research sought to explore.

The subsequent section sets out the research findings in terms of three themes: the study-work interface and the notion of 'simultaneous immersion'; the organisational context and factors that enable or constrain the application of learning; and the impact on longer-term professional development. The paper concludes that viewing online programmes of this kind as examples of work-based learning illuminates their particular contribution to the personal and professional development of mid career public service practitioners. These conclusions propose an additional, temporal, dimension to Raelin's (2008) conceptualisation of work-based learning, and suggest ways to enhance the contribution of online study to work-based learning. These steps underline the importance of reflection as a meta-skill for postgraduate, practitioner students.

Conceptual review

The conceptual framework for this research draws together three key elements: the individual reflective practitioner; reflective practice carried out 'publicly' within the workplace; and the influence on learning and reflective practice of the wider organisational context. Our entry point, however, is the individual.

The reflective practitioner

Reynolds and Mason (2002) summarise theories of individual learning into four main perspectives: (i) 'learning as behaviour', which is *expert*/teacher-centred; (ii) 'learning as understanding' which is *content*-focused, drawing on theories of cognition to understand how the mind absorbs information; (iii) 'learning through knowledge construction', which considers how the individual creates *meaning* from experience, dialogue, and tacit knowledge; and (iv) 'learning as social practice', which, like social constructivism, views learning as a social activity. Here the emphasis is on the *group* rather than the individual, and on 'situated learning' and *negotiation* of activities (cf. Stacey et al., 2004).

This study adopts a constructivist stance and, following Raelin (2008), views learning as a social practice. The concept of the 'reflective practitioner', first theorised by Schon (1999) is a social constructivist formulation, which highlights reflection as a mechanism for professional development. Schon emphasized, in particular, the role of reflection in surfacing tacit knowledge and contextual understanding and in enabling the practitioner to 'reframe' difficulties into solvable problems (Cheetham and Chivers, 1998). Raelin (2008:129) similarly highlights the problem-related dimension of reflection in suggesting that a key characteristic of reflective practitioners is the capacity to 're-invest in learning by participating in continuing education, by seeking out greater challenges in their work, and by tackling more complex representations of recurrent problems'. In the process, the reflective practitioner is 'problem posing as much as problem solving'.

Reflective practice within the workplace

The concept of the reflective practitioner, as discussed above, is concerned with understanding how individuals can use learning and reflection to enhance their professional practice. Raelin (2008) builds on this concept to offer a more collective, organisationally-located approach to reflection, through his concept of work-based learning, where theory is merged with practice, and knowledge with experience. Raelin's model draws together two sets of dimensions - 'theory and practice modes of learning, and explicit and tacit forms of knowledge' - in an enhancement of Kolb's (1984) learning styles inventory. Four types of work-based learning are identified: conceptualisation (formal knowledge from theoretical learning); experimentation (tacit knowledge gained in the process of trying out new theories); reflection (explicit knowledge gained from conscious reflection on practice) and experience (tacit knowledge embedded in practice) (Raelin, 2008:70). Raelin (2001) also notes that there is a temporal dimension to reflection: it may be anticipatory (a form of planning and analysis about how to approach a particular situation); contemporaneous (carried out while engaged in an experience) or retrospective (focused on recent experience).

A key element in Raelin's understanding of work-based learning is the concept of 'public reflection'. This emphasizes reflection as a collective endeavour, which is associated with learning dialogues and privileges the process of inqiury, takes place 'in the midst of practice and may be shared in the presence of others" (Raelin 2001: 15) and seeks to "involve others in the search for new solutions' (Raelin, 2008:129). Ultimately, the aim of work-based learning is to 'improv[e] the level of public discourse both in groups and organisations' (Raelin, 2008:111). Raelin's emphasis on public reflection chimes with that of Argyris (1991) who stresses the importance for organisational learning

of 'productive reasoning'- a process of testing claims publicly against evidence - while Schein (2010) highlights the key role of inquiry and discourse in his analysis of the dimensions necessary for a learning culture. While Argyris and Schein both focus on the role of top managers and leaders (Finger and Brand 1999), Vince and Saleem's (2004) study of caution and blame in a UK public sector organisation emphasizes the importance of collective, public reflection by managers throughout the organisation.

Raelin emphasises 'action learning', 'action science' and 'communities of practice' as mechanisms through which individual learning leads to transformation of practice in the workplace. Action learning takes place when 'learners learn with others by working on and then reflecting on actual "actions" occurring in their real work setting' (Raelin, 2008:84). 'Communities of practice' refers to the development of 'tacit collective practices' among groups of people as they develop a shared sense of purpose and way of doing things (Raelin, 2008:93). Finally, 'action science' is similar to the term 'reflection-in-action' used by Schon (1999) in his theorisation of the reflective practitioner, and the process through which learners gain 'heightened awareness of the assumptions underpinning their actions and interactions.

The organisational context - a processual approach

The concepts of reflective practice and 'public reflection' are both concerned with the practitioner within the workplace; insights from organisational learning theory help to deepen further our understanding of how the organisational context influences and mediates this learning process.

Fenwick and McMillan (2005:45) in their study of learning within public service organisations, suggest that learning is mediated by organisational structure and culture, noting the importance of an 'individual's place in the hierarchy, their relationships with superiors or subordinates, and the existing culture of the organisation". Like Elkjaer, (2001) Fenwick and McMillan emphasise the importance of understanding the institutional and social context within which learning takes place, in contrast to perspectives on organisational learning which see it as a process of individual learning, albeit in a social context, and of personal adaptation.

Schein (2010) also underlines the importance of organisational structure and culture in mediating learning, adding leadership as a third key issue – a combination of issues that is also indicated by McCracken (2004) in his study of managerial barriers to learning. In a conceptualisation that mirrors that of the 'reflective practititioner', Schein sees the challenge as being to create 'learning cultures' within organisations that, first, have the ability to read and respond to the external environment; and second, have the capacity to *reflect* on internal relations and *adapt* to those changes in the external environment (Schein, 2010). Most importantly, 'learning must be collective, processual and cognisant of organisational power patterns' (Schein, 2010). Here Easterby-Smith et al's (2008) processual perspective on 'absorptive capacity', defined as 'the capacity of an organisation to absorb new ideas and ways of working', is helpful. Adopting Foucault's (1998) distinction between 'episodic power' (discrete political acts initiated by self-interested actors') and systemic power (which is diffused through the social systems that constitute organisations)' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008: 495), these authors conclude that while 'external access to information is influenced by systemic power, the internal appreciation and utilisation of external knowledge depended mainly on episodic power' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008: 496).

This insight has particular relevance for the integration of postgraduate learning into practice; suggesting that securing organisational support to study; and creating opportunities to put learning from study into *practice* might require the mobilisation of different types of power. This distinction is explicated with respect to three modes of knowledge transfer within organisations. 'Syntactic transfer' refers to transmission of (explicit, coded) information, semantic transfer to the tacit 'creation of shared meanings', and pragmatic transfer to the transformation of knowledge into practice 'through political efforts and the negotiation of practices.' The progression through these three modes of knowledge transfer is conceptualised as an 'additive' process through which the 'absorptive repertoire of the organisation' expands over time. Crucially, the graduation to 'pragmatic modes of knowledge transfer depends on the mobilisation of episodic power' (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008: 498); reinforcing the critical role of leadership in facilitating the application of new learning (cf. Schein, 2010, Hailey and James, 2002).

The issues explored so far – reflective practice, public reflection within work-based learning and the role of structure, culture and power in mediating learning, all speak to the complex relationship between individual learning and the workplace setting. The following pilot study seeks to illuminate this relationship further, and examine how it is affected by a process of 'simultaneous immersion' in work and online, distance-based study.

The pilot study: Online Distance-based Masters Programmes in Public Policy and Management at the University of York

Introduction and methodological considerations

This study explores how individual student-practitioners make sense of their world as they integrate experiences from study and practice. This framing of the research problem located the study, theoretically, within the interpretive tradition, in which the subject's creation and negotiation of meaning is central; and, methodologically, within the narrative research approach characterised by i) a focus on the individual's interpretation of his/her own experience; ii) the presentation of this experience holistically, and iii) a particular focus on processes and moments of 'sense making' (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, Trahar, 2009, Duff and Bell, 2002).

As noted earlier, this paper draws on a pilot study with a relatively small group of (ten) students and alumni that have participated in three online (distance) part-time masters programmes in public management offered by the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York. This group included nine students at different stages in a programme of study lasting three or more years (but with a minimum of one year's experience of the programme) and one alumnus. This was from a total population of 216 current students and 350 alumni. Students in these three-year programmes have a variety of roles in governmental, nongovernmental, intergovernmental, international and private sector organisations, in 70 countries. The student profile is predominantly 'mid career', with an age range from 20s to 50s, and an average age in the mid-late 30s.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with all the pilot study participants during April-May 2013. The interviews were conducted via a Skype connection and explored questions on individual motivation for and experience of combining work and study, reflections on the content and process of the programmes, and the organisational context within which they apply their learning. The resulting empirical material, presented below, is in the form of direct quotes by study participants and their interpretation by the interviewer, who at the time of this research was an associate tutor who was familiar with the programmes, but had no formal relationship with the participants. In all cases these quotes are anonymised and pseudonyms have been used throughout.

While an attempt was made to include a cross section of participants, in terms of gender, geographical and institutional location, and stage in their studies (or beyond); a primary criterion for selection was their identification, by teaching staff, as individuals who had expressed an interest in exploring the relationship between study and work. This decision may have skewed findings towards a positive view of this relationship. However, given that this was not a programme evaluation as such, but a pilot study whose aim was to shed light on the nature and dynamics of this relationship; and, as such, to inform the design of a more extensive research project; the researchers concluded that such a purposive selection would support rather than undermine this goal.

Research findings

The following discussion of research findings is organised around three emergent themes: i) the study-work interface and the notion of 'simultaneous immersion'; ii) the organisational context and factors that enable or constrain application of learning; and iii) the impact on longer term professional development as a 'slow convergence' between individual learning and development of reflective practice in the workplace.

The study-work interface and the notion of 'simultaneous immersion'

It is often said that an advantage of full time study is the ability – luxury even – to immerse oneself in learning. A key finding of this study is that a structured distance-learning experience can facilitate a different kind of immersion: the simultaneous immersion in learning and practice. This may sound contradictory, however the experience of participants in this study highlighted instances where learning from the course (conceptualisation) was integrated into work-based processes of action learning, and the development of new 'tacit collective practices' (cf. Raelin 2008). While in

conventional masters study these elements might occur sequentially, part-time distance learning can, in certain circumstances, enable these processes to take place simultaneously, in a manner that may be mutually supportive and reinforcing.

An example provided by Adam, a senior civil servant in the UK, is illustrative. Adam was responsible for managing a departmental change process and saw the potential to employ one of the analytical methods covered by the module he was studying. He trained one of his staff to use this method in a series of key meetings and then, together with the staff team, reflected on its use. As he explained:

> I've got a small team who are cross-discipline people. And it dawned on me that we needed some way to express a number of tensions that existed around this particular issue, and I thought I'm sure that this must suit Lewin's [Force Field Analysis] theory…. In the end, I wasn't in the meeting that created it, but I managed to brief one of my team well enough such that they could go into a meeting and explain it to other people. And actually, we got a fantastic result in terms of illustrating the number of different tension points that existed.

Reflecting on this experience, Adam articulated it as a process of immersion in terms of reading the theory and then 'reading it back into the organisation':

> If you're going to go and learn it properly, then you've got to immerse yourself in it. If you're very deeply in it at the same time [as] when you're working, then it's a real opportunity just to launch these things in a practical sense in your head rather than in a theoretical one...[...]... And I can kind of see now where things might not work, or why they might not work over the next year or so, because of the way that actually it's been rolled out according to this particular theory. So, you know… that's helped me not only read into that theory but also *read it back into the organisation*.

In this case, an opportunity for 'public reflection' (Raelin 2008) was key to the process of immersion, understood as the embedding of knowledge in practice, which had arisen for a number of reasons. First, there was an organisational change process underway; increasing the likelihood that such an

opportunity would arise; and, second, Adam was well placed to capitalise on such an opportunity given his position in the organisation and role in the change process. These and other contextual factors will be explored further in the next section, on the organisational context.

In addition, there were factors relating to the masters programme design and delivery which are worth highlighting here. In this example, Adam was able to select from a range of theories and methods made available to him the one which, in his view, best suited the situation at work at that time. This echoed the experience of other participants interviewed, who viewed modules structured in such a way as to allow review and analysis of a *range* of theories and models as more helpful than those that followed a more linear narrative. Interestingly this distinction appeared to be more relevant to participants in their application of learning than content-based distinctions (such that separating policy- and management-related subjects); which tended to dissolve in the context of workplace application. This point was reinforced by Jenny, who had recently moved from a role in the UK public sector to join the senior management team of a relatively small and dynamic non-governmental organisation. In this context, the opportunity to use different models as lenses on this new organisational context was particularly valuable:

> Particularly in the Policy Analysis module, it was looking at all the different… frameworks, the iron triangles, their dependencies, the role that the media can have. And then 'Leading and Managing Change' [another module], looking at the head office, it is so relevant to my role. *But again, it was looking at all the different models*… I could really see how that plays out in an organisation very nicely, and I have been using it in my current role quite a lot. So, I had lots of examples that I show a lot of people.

For some study participants, engagement in online study went beyond immediate departmental or organisational boundaries to professional networks more broadly. For Elizabeth, a senior manager in a UN organization, course assignments (and in particular, the final independent study project) provided an opportunity to further develop these professional relationships. Notably, while her previous interactions with these colleagues had previously been on a task-oriented basis, engaging them in discussions about assignment ideas took these relationships into 'a more collegial space':

> This [independent study project] is giving me a genuine opportunity to explore [a particular issue], which will then deepen our understanding of how to develop our approaches. So … first of all, it's sort of, "That's an interesting question. I'd like to know what the answer is to that." But in some ways, in some of the earlier assignments, it gave me a reason to talk to certain people that I have professional links with that I might not have talked to the same way otherwise… You know, there's two people I particularly work prior to, you know…I'm going to have lunch with them for them to tell me what they think about [my chosen topic]… And one of them [said] "Excellent choice! I can't wait to read it." The other one said, "Oh I'm happy to read it."

These accounts highlight examples of 'public reflection' (Raelin 2008) to which participation in online study has contributed. A question arose, however, as to whether these examples of public reflection in the workplace were visible to tutors and fellow students, in other words, the extent to which they were an integral part of the online programmes, and whether this mattered. From discussions with participants it became clear that these processes were perceived by students as taking place outside the boundaries of the online programme. The following excerpt from an interview with Betty a senior manager in an international development NGO based in Southern Africa, suggests that a lack of appreciation of learning could, in some circumstances, inhibit fruitful work-study interaction:

> You'd be surprised how many times like in the past module, I've called people to my office and I've given them like 20 minutes to just talk to them through that what they are doing and how relevant the skills in change management are. So I find that I may not do a very great job in terms of putting together a good assignment, right? But I'm actually doing a lot more in terms of getting people on my team to understand what good change management is like…
>
> And that part of what's happening, of course, is invisible to my tutor... But it's real and it's adding value.

These reflections from current students point to the potential for online study to contribute to the development of reflective practice; and this is both enabled and constrained by factors internal and external to the programme design. While the external factors will be explored in the next section, key factors internal to the programme are worth highlighting here. First, these findings suggest that module design that enables students to exercise independence and select theory to fit situations at work are the most conducive to public reflection and transformation of practice. It is worth recalling

that the students participating in this study were highly motivated and aware of the potential of study-work synergies, a factor that might also be associated with high levels of capacity and confidence to exercise this independence. On the other hand, the 'invisibility' of workplace application of learning to online programme teaching staff can be a constraint to fruitful work-study interaction; which suggests that extending feedback mechanisms beyond programme boundaries might enhance the programmes, and students' learning, yet further.

The organisational context: mobilising episodic power

What are the characteristics of an organisation able to *encourage* and *absorb* learning? The findings of this study concur with the reviewed literature that these are different questions, with contrasting answers. A key finding was that while the organisational 'hardware' of structures, systems and policies was a key to enabling students to enrol in a course of online masters study – as well as rewarding its completion via promotion opportunities – the absorption of the students' newly acquired knowledge into workplace practice *while still in the process of study* depended on more informal elements of organisational 'software', in particular workplace culture (especially at the team or unit level) and styles of leadership. As Katia, who works for a UN organisation, explained:

> The general policy in the organisation is to support career advancement. And…there is a policy for that and there are mechanisms that the staff can use as the study leave. So that's the institutional part. Though … it depends very much on the personal interpretation of the supervisor and also on the…kind of the spirit and the openness in the team.

This distinction was clear to Jenny who, as noted previously, had recently joined the senior management team of an organisation where the workplace culture was a marked contrast to her previous employer. In her case, an 'inquisitive' workplace culture, fostered by a new management

team, including the CEO (her immediate manager) who was receptive to the ideas she brought from her studies, proved to be a powerful combination:

> I think it's a very innovative, very creative, a very *inquisitive* culture where people actually, they really like to explore things…. […]… I think it's because it's a brand new senior management team. I think [they are] very, very big on education and training and career development… I think if you have somebody very different at the helm, it might be a very different story.

In particular, her line manager – and CEO – had a background in social policy, and so was able to act as a sounding board and 'bridge' between the academic 'language' of the programme and the 'real world' in which such language might alienate other colleagues:

> I have to be really careful not to use the language from the course. I think…in the shape of my line manager I can because he's on the same page. Yeah, he knows a lot of the models that I'm referring to. And he's very interested in having those discussions. [But] I think some of my senior management colleagues, if I'm not careful it just alienates them because they're so detailed.

These accounts of the key role of the line manager as well as interpersonal relations with colleagues tend to support Easterby-Smith *et al.'s* (2008) argument that knowledge transfer beyond the 'syntactic' (information exchange) level requires the exercise of *episodic* power by key individuals at particular moments, rather than the systemic power embedded in the organisational structures and policies. Here the location of several participants in senior positions is also significant, since they were *themselves* able to exercise episodic power, and at moments of their own choosing.

The earlier example of Adam's use of Force Field Analysis in an ongoing change process (see page X) illustrated the role of episodic power in facilitating the application of learning. At the same time, this example also highlighted the importance of the wider organisational and environmental context.. While Adam had been able to draw on learning from the programme to develop a shared understanding among colleagues about the complexity of the issue at hand (progressing from

'syntactic' or 'semantic' communication, to use Easterby et al.'s (2008) terminology), he recognised that the process of knowledge transfer has, on this occasion, only gone as far as 'syntactic' transfer (creation of shared meanings), and that proceeding to 'pragmatic' knowledge transfer (negotiation of practices) requires a combination of further individual effort and organisational opportunity. The following passage illustrates this dynamic interplay between individual capacity and action associated with a 'process perspective' on organisational learning (cf. Easterby Smith *et al.* 2008):

> I suppose the only problem thereafter was using it for anything other than an illustration of how complicated an issue it was, because I don't think…I am necessarily expert enough in them to be able to prosecute it all the way through to a conclusion …[…]… What we didn't do was to then carry on with it and break it down and use it as a sort of conflict breaker, because we were perhaps not at that stage in the work anyway yet.

The degree of organisational environment change or stability emerged as a key factor enabling and constraining online learning and its application at work. This relationship appeared, at least initially, to be somewhat paradoxical, since while organizational stability is conducive to study ('immersion' in the conventional sense) periods of organizational change provided opportunities for 'simultaneous immersion', in learning and application. There was, however, an important temporal dimension. As John, a UK civil servant, noted, beginning studies at a time of organisational stability helped him to focus on his studies at this crucial early stage when he was developing his intellectual confidence. A year on, the 'turbulent environment' he experienced at work provided an opportunity to apply what he was learning, when he had the skills and, crucially, the confidence to do so.

> I have really benefited in beginning the course during a period of stability in my career. This gave me the opportunity to focus on my studies while building the confidence that I had the correct skills and experience and ... Following this period I found myself working on large scale change projects which had direct relevance to … the modules. I have been able to apply my experiences to my work and vice versa which has led me to continue to grow in confidence both at work and in my studies. I wonder though if I would have been in the same position if I had started the course while in a more turbulent environment, without the time to spend gaining confidence in my studies.

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In a very different organizational context, David, who works for a humanitarian organisation in East Africa, found that undertaking online study *while* immersed in an institutional environment in constant flux empowered him to interpret and respond to these shifting dynamics, in real time:

> [After the module on] Change Management…I was able to know exactly my kind of organisation in terms of the continuum within which we operate.   [It] brought me the idea of how the organisation was led between emergency…that is our unstable… and stable environmental continuum... And it really helped me understand the nexus between stability and instability and why that has to have the two legs standing at…on either side and being able to move back across.

These findings point to the dynamic interplay between the fluidity of organisational cultures and change processes and individual decisions to exercise 'episodic power' (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008) that produces opportunities for transferring learning from online study to the workplace and embedding it in professional practice. A key finding is the simultaneous dependence on variables at individual, team, organization and wider environmental levels that are often in flux, and difficult to predict. Nevertheless, these findings point to a potential contribution of online study to raising awareness of these different types of power, and in particular the *limits* of systemic power *vis a vis* other, more flexible types of power. This could lead to a more nuanced 'reading' of the operation of power in organisations, as a dimension of 'application of learning' as a skill in its own right.

Online study and professional development: 'a slow convergence'

This last set of findings places the insights discussed so far into a broader context of personal and career development over time – bearing in mind that participants are likely to change their role and/or organisation at least once during the period of study, and beyond. Here the reflections of Michael, an alumnus who had completed his studies two years previously, is instructive. At the time

he began the programme, Michael had been in a relatively junior role in a bilateral donor organisation. At this stage there was, in his experience, a clear distinction between 'technical' subjects where he was perceived and recognised by colleagues as bringing knowledge of best practices from the course; and more emotive, politically-charged issues (what Michael called 'emotional' subjects) where he was perceived to have a personal stake, was regarded with scepticism; seen as partial and therefore less credible, as he explained:

> When we were discussing why NGOs should adopt practices where they collect information and gather evidence ... there seemed to be very little opposition to some of the ideas I may brought forward because I was also very careful to present them, not so much as my ideas but as ideas of best practice …
>
> At the time the organisation was also undergoing a change process… I also undertook the course on leading and managing change. But…people just saw those as, you know, my opinions because the entire discussion around change management was very emotional, it was sensitive, people are going to lose jobs, there was uncertainty… So it was a much tighter rope to walk with the change management as opposed to when it was just purely technical stuff.

Since then Michael has changed role (and country location) a number of times, progressing to more senior positions. In the process his mode of 'public reflection' has evolved from the sharing of externally validated 'best practice' to having his *own* interpretation of complex events taken seriously. Or, to put it another way, he has become increasingly able to mobilise episodic power (or exercise it himself) in different situations. Placing these reflections within the broader perspective of the previous five years (three years of study plus two years as an alumnus), Michael concluded that participation in online studies had facilitated, for him, a 'seamless transition' between study and work, which did not end when he completed his studies. Rather, he had become what he called a 'lifelong learner', continually seeking out ways to 'reinvest' in work-based learning (cf. Raelin, 2008):

> I still don't have a problem drawing back on what I studied… This online study has this potential of generating professional individuals who develop an interest in lifelong

learning. So, the fact that you didn't really stop working or dedicate all your time to the study, still engaging your day-to-day work and other things... enhances your own research skills while you are doing your work.

Margaret, a current student based in a UN organisation at a relatively junior level had a similar perspective, though viewed from an earlier stage in both her studies and career. Displaying a tacit understanding of what it is to exercise episodic power, she had re-interpreted her lack of position power as an advantageous position, which left her 'free to experiment'. For Margaret, the motivation to continue studying came, not from the promise of a Masters degree qualification on completion, but from the experience, in real time, of a process of 'slow convergence' between study and practice; and, importantly, the *expectation* that this process would continue into the future:

> I think if there's a bigger discrepancy, if there is a big void between what I'm learning and what I'm practicing, I think it's just harder to motivate me to continue doing it. I think that if there's more convergence at least, you know, towards learning and practice, I think it motivates you. You feel the worth and incentive, you know? For me, it was the *slow convergence* of it, yeah.

Interestingly, both Michael's and Margaret's accounts highlight a temporal dimension to the quality of public reflection and development of reflective practice, to which part-time distance study *while anchored in the workplace* appeared to make a significant contribution. This finding supports our initial hypothesis, though further research would be needed to find out if this holds true for a wider range of students, and not just the highly motivated students selected for this study. In this case, the longer time span associated with online study period can become an advantage, since it allows for cycles of learning and experimentation as the student progresses in their career. However, as Betty's account, presented in the previous section, illustrated, the perceived *invisibility* of this process of 'slow convergence' could contribute to the experience of 'low points', particularly when study and professional pressure coincide. At the same time, several accounts in this paper highlighted positive experiences of work-study 'convergence', suggesting that greater awareness of the dynamics of this

trajectory, on the part of students and tutors alike, could further enhance the experience and outcomes of 'simultaneous immersion' in study and work.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the experiences and perceptions of a cross-section of public service practitioners enrolled in online masters programmes in public policy and management at the University of York. While limited in scope, this study appears to support our initial hypothesis that the study-work interaction enabled by online study can make a distinctive contribution to the development of reflective practice (Schon 1999).

Findings of this study indicated that 'simultaneous immersion' in study and practice made possible by distance-based study can create the conditions for 'public reflection' that are central to work based learning (Raelin 2008). Several participants found that the extended period of study while working (as compared with the much shorter duration of a full time masters programme) created the space for what one participant described as a 'slow convergence' between academic learning and professional development, over time. This insight into the temporal dimension of online study was shared by participants located at different stages in the work-study trajectory, from a second year student looking forward to an alumnus looking back. What these accounts had in common was a notion of continuous learning and application, as a source of motivation for further study and cycles of personal development.

This potential for 'slow convergence' between academic learning and professional development was mediated by a range of factors; associated with programme design and with the organisational contexts in which students find opportunities to apply their learning. In terms of programme design, two key issues emerged. Firstly, work-study interaction proved fruitful when course content

provided scope for students to consider a range of approaches and select the most appropriate theoretical 'lens' on their reality. Secondly, not all work-study interaction is visible to programme staff. The lack of appreciation (or the perception of it) of fruitful application of learning, in particular, can have a negative cumulative effect on student motivation, particularly at 'low points' when work and study pressure coincide.

The study also indicates that the application of learning in the workplace is dependent on variables at the level of the individual, team and organisation, and that these are difficult to predict. Nevertheless, three key issues emerged.

The first concerns the student's position within the organisation: although not in the obvious sense, since organisational structures and systems, while important for securing institutional support to enrol in a course of study, are less important when finding opportunities to apply learning. A key indication of this research is that the creation of opportunities for application of learning require the mobilisation of 'episodic power' (Easterby et al. 2008) exercised by individuals, through interpersonal interactions and styles of leadership, rather than the 'systemic power' embedded in institutional policies and systems. It is in this respect that the student's institutional position is key – the extent to the workplace culture enables them to exercise episodic power themselves, or influence their colleagues to do so. This relates to a second point, whether the workplace culture – which in larger organisations means the team culture – is one that values learning and enquiry.

Thirdly, the relationship between learning and the level of organisational stability or turbulence emerged as a complex issue in this study. While organisational stability can be an enabling factor early on in the programme when the student is new to masters' study and still gathering confidence, once their process of study is underway organisational turbulence can become an advantage as it

generates opportunities to apply learning and experiment with new ideas. This creates, for different individuals, in differing organisational settings, a wide range of work-study trajectories in which cycles of change are superimposed on an overall sense of linear progression in terms of mastery and confidence. Interviews with students at different stages of study, as well as an alumnus with several years of post-study work experience revealed the complexity and diversity of these trajectories, even within the small group that participated in this study.

In all cases, however, it was necessary to incorporate a temporal dimension into our understanding of how capacity for 'public reflection' (Raelin 2008) extends and deepens over time – both in the short term (responding to cycles of change and stability within organisations) and over the longer term, accompanying individual career progression and personal development. In this context, the extended duration of online study while working can be viewed as an enabling factor that works with the grain of reflective practice. Furthermore, the ongoing 'simultaneous immersion' in work and study means that the completion of studies need not be experienced as a sharp disjuncture.

A lesson from this study, therefore, is that 'application of learning' is a skill in its own right, which can be 'developed', particularly in the context of part-time distance education, and which needs to be recognised as such when programme – level learning outcomes are designed. A key element is the student's awareness of episodic power and their ability to judge how to exercise or mobilise episodic power in different situations and workplace cultures. A second, complementary element might be enhanced awareness of their longer-term work-study trajectory, and their place in it at a particular point in time, so as to be able to capitalise on opportunities and ride out the 'low points'. Both elements provide pointers as to how online programmes might be enhanced, and, above all, to the value of seeing reflection as a 'meta-skill' which is integral to postgraduate-level professional development.

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This was a pilot study and therefore limited in scope: its primary aim being to generate questions for future research. These findings point to the value of further study, which either broadens the target group or deepens understanding of the study-work dynamic among this group over time. In the light of the indications above that the extended duration of online study goes with the grain of reflective practice, we would argue for the latter (longitudinal) approach. In either case, there appears to be considerable potential for employing online, distance-based study as a lens for enhancing understanding of the relationship between study, learning and work.

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