Article

Teaching HR Professionals: The Classroom as a Community of Practice

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Abstract: This paper introduces an innovative course design incorporating both communities of practice and reflective practice as a learning strategy for part-time learners in higher education. The new design has been applied to teaching HR practitioners in a UK-based business school. Findings indicate that the suggested way of organizing teaching and learning for part-time professionals is very informative and facilitates a richer engagement with theory whilst addressing issues of practice.

Keywords: community of practice; part-time education; HRM teaching; HRM; work context; organizational practices; reflective learning

1. The Rise of Part-Time Education

Driven by societal changes, the demand for part-time education, in spite of the turbulence in higher education, is growing. The number of part-time students in the higher education sector has steadily increased in recent years. In the UK, 34.5% of higher education students studied part-time in the academic year 2009/2010, showing an increase of 1% over 2008/2009 [1]. In the US, 37.72% of students attended higher education institutions on a part-time basis in 2007/08 [2]. The business education sector follows a similar pattern. In the UK, 32.15% of business students studied part-time in

the academic year 2009/2010 [1]. In the US, 57.8% of MBA students studied on a part-time basis in 2009/2010 [3].

The focus of this paper is the part-time HR education sector. The proportion of part-time students in the HR education sector is high. In the UK 60.81% of students studied HR on part-time basis in the academic year 2009/2010 [1]. Part-time HR education in UK has three distinctive features. First, the majority of part-time HR students are already employed in HR-related occupations. Second, more often than not, employers subsidize the education of their HR professionals. Last but not least, education in the HR profession is strongly influenced by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) which imposes high professional and educational standards. These features lead to certain challenges in organizing the teaching and learning process for part-time HR students.

2. Challenges in Part-Time Education

A number of challenges in part-time education can be identified. Laird and Cruce [4] suggest that because of the teaching methods traditionally used in higher education there is a high chance of part-timers being less engaged with educationally purposeful activities than their full-time counterparts. Because part-time students are working full-time they are more concerned with finding theory which helps to address issues of practice and so their expectations can exceed the scope of traditionally organized university courses [5]. This leads to the challenge of increasing the relevance of course content and delivery methods for part-time students.

Jamieson *et al.* add to the engagement agenda that part-time students tend to be invisible or have less contact with faculty because they work full-time and study mainly at home, only attending evening lectures [6]. As a result these students are more sensitive to and critical of the taught material and its delivery. There is then a difficulty in organizing student-centered teaching which would take into account students' experiences and ensure a depth of reflexive practice [7]. Finally, while part-time students are well positioned to translate their newly-acquired knowledge into action this may lead to a further challenge in terms of the relevance of the theory and its possible disconnection from personal experience.

The difficulties discussed in organizing teaching and learning for part-time students are summarized as challenges to ensure (1) academic rigor, (2) depth of personal learning, (3) relevance of lessons learnt and (4) engagement of part-time learners. A framework is suggested in this paper which seeks to address the need to develop an adequate pedagogy to enable those teaching part-time learners to overcome these challenges.

3. Toward a Framework for Part-Time Teaching

The literature on pedagogy in relation to part-time learners in higher education is limited. Berggren and Söderlund [7] argue for the adoption of action research combined with an experiential learning approach. While experiential learning has a well-deserved place in professional development using reflection in order to reconsider personal practices [8,9], action research has established itself as "an approach to knowledge generation that is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client and that aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge" [10]. This approach would challenge the status quo from a participative perspective but would also require

learners on a taught course to become researchers; expected to develop theory and empirically test propositions deriving from that theory. Taking into consideration the relatively short duration of a standard course, usually 12 weeks or less, such a demanding approach may put learners under too much pressure (e.g., stress, time management, work-life balance).

Our method has been designed around two key aspects of learning which take place both in the classroom and beyond; individual learning and group learning. Individual learning revolves around constructivist pedagogy where course participants construct new knowledge about issues at hand while drawing on their existing knowledge. Group learning is represented by joint work in class and the development of shared beliefs and a common understanding. To formulate a teaching and learning strategy in such a way as to enable these aspects to be covered the community of practice concept has been utilized [11] aided by reflective practice [9].

Communities of practice differ from group or collaborative learning. The key difference is that communities of practice focus on the process of learning and building knowledge for all members at both the individual and community level [12]. Communities of practice span different organizations and allow members to develop expertise collectively, gain confidence in their strengths and keep their professional edge [13]. In the context of HR education, they would enable the part-time learners to share organizational experiences, learn from each other in idiosyncratic ways and construct new knowledge.

The reflective element of the proposed method utilizes layered critical reflective practice. While embracing "subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" learners are guided to articulate their experiences [14]. Then, at the group or class level, learners discuss their own and their peers' reflections in order to derive a shared perspective on the subject matter under consideration.

The implementation of the proposed method is outlined in the following sections, with emphasis being placed on the details of the course design and the analysis of the students' experience.

4. Research Setting

This research was undertaken over the period of one academic year (2011–2012) in a UK business school. The views presented below belong to the students from two cohorts with around 25 part-time HR students in each and were obtained by means of an 18-question module evaluation questionnaire (Table 1).

4.1. Part-Time Learner

The student profile is predominantly adult learners pursuing a CIPD accredited HRM degree who have returned to university, driven mainly by the prospect of career progression. Almost all of the students are employed in an HR-related capacity, *i.e.*, they are already HR professionals who have engaged with the specifics of the profession and have busy work schedules. Furthermore, the accreditation body, CIPD, closely monitors the quality of these accredited programs to maintain high professional standards. This alone may present certain challenges because of the mismatch between research-driven theory and the mundane reality of practice experienced by students and the resulting

pressure on faculty to bridge this gap. Finally, contemporary HRM practice itself is largely policy-centered and hence may call for a greater degree of occupation-related networking.

Table 1. The module evaluation questionnaire.

Questions	Cohort A (pilot)		Cohort B (control)	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree
The learning and teaching methods used in lectures helped my learning	76%	24%	35%	65%
The learning and teaching methods used in tutorials helped my learning	81%	19%	35%	65%
The learning and teaching methods used in seminars helped my learning	81%	19%	35%	65%
The learning and teaching methods used in practical work helped my learning	81%	19%	35%	65%
The tutor used a range of different learning methods in this module	81%	19%	43%	57%
There were adequate resources available in the library for this module	57%	43%	22%	52%
IT facilities were adequate for this module	62%	38%	17%	48%
The support materials made available for this module helped my learning	76%	24%	35%	65%
I was given sufficient notice of timetabling arrangements for this module	48%	52%	35%	65%
I was given sufficient notice of other practical arrangements for this module	48%	52%	43%	57%
The workload was manageable for this module	81%	19%	43%	57%
The module content was pitched at the right level	81%	19%	43%	57%
I found the module interesting	86%	14%	43%	57%
The module content met my expectations	81%	19%	43%	57%
The feedback I received from tutors on my work during this module was helpful and aided my learning	86%	14%	43%	57%
What did you find most useful about this module?				
What did you find least useful about this module?	Qualitative feedback (see Table 3)			
Are there any changes you would recommend making to this module?				

4.2. Context

The new course design was used to organize teaching and learning for the "HR policy and practice" module. Taking advantage of the fact that two cohorts of part-time undergraduate HR students take this module concurrently, the new design was introduced for Cohort A while Cohort B followed a traditional approach. This allowed more reliable observations of the effect of introducing the new course design to be made. The previous cohorts' feedback on material and delivery indicated that despite the use of the most up to date research findings and interactive delivery methods incorporating group work, the participants felt that courses did not meet their expectations and that the content provided would not help them to address the issues they face in their organizations.

One of the key challenges in rethinking the content and delivery of this course lies in the fact most mid-sized, large and sometimes even small companies have well documented HR policies which serve as the basis for the design of appropriate operational procedures and practices. The bulk of these polices utilize the "best practice" approach [15] and are fairly contextualized rather than being based on relevant theoretical input. Therefore, a typical teaching approach, such as a faculty-induced attempt to initiate a review of established HR policies, usually meets with misunderstanding and resistance from students, as it calls for a degree of "rebellion" against the employer who is often funding attendance on the course and program of study.

The proposed design of part-time modules relies on a synthesis between situational findings that students have experienced at work and the theory offered in class. In order to enable this synthesis three strands of pedagogical theory have been employed; a model of learning from experience [16], reflection-on-action [9] and the revised taxonomy of the cognitive domain [17].

4.3. Design of Learning Sessions

Our conceptual framework to enable effective learning by HR, and potentially other, professionals through a comparative situational analysis consists of the following steps:

1. Input from the workplace
   Composing a brief (300 word) statement of a situation, e.g., an HR policy, prior to attending a session;
2. Theory input in class
   An interactive presentation addressing mainstream theory and recent research findings (one hour) aiming at understanding theoretical concerns;
3. Individual reflection in class
   Reflection, guided by the salient points of the theory, aiming at applying both mainstream and critical theory to the situation identified in the initial step;
4. Group discussion in class
   Evaluative comparison of peers' situations in relation to the theory aiming to realize and articulate differences between theory and practice;
5. Consideration of potential impact
   Formulation of the potential impact on the existing workplace situation, e.g., creating a more suitable and theoretically sound HR policy to address the situation analyzed.

This framework is used on a weekly basis to organize classroom sessions and get students into an analytical mood enabling the formation of a community which allows students to develop expertise collectively while at the same time gaining confidence in their competences and keeping their professional edge.

At the end of the module students are instructed to summarize their weekly evaluative reflections into a piece of critical reflective writing [9] aimed at reviewing their theory-informed views on the particular domain of knowledge, HR policy and practice met in this case. The proposed framework ensures that the intended learning outcomes are met by developing progressive contextualization of the material through remembering, understanding and applying higher cognitive levels of analysis, evaluation and creation [17].

5. Discussion of Results

These results are derived from two (pilot and control) instances of the module's delivery and are drawn from two streams of information; student views and staff observations. The former have been solicited on the completion of both modules using a questionnaire completed anonymously (Table 1). It is a standard questionnaire adopted by the host institution for the purpose of module evaluation. Staff

observations cover student attendance, use of technology to support student collaboration and the practice of reflective writing.

The above module evaluation questionnaire covers various aspects of the module's delivery and associated support. Questions 1 to 4 and 11 to 18 were directly relevant to testing the proposed framework. It should be noted that the evaluation questionnaire used had six Likert scale choices: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree and not applicable. The fact that the responses of both cohorts lie mainly in the areas of "strongly agree" and "agree" illustrate that the overall perception of the quality of the module is quite high (Table 1). Furthermore, a comparative review of Cohort A (pilot) and Cohort B (control) results indicate that the students who followed the new reflective and practice driven teaching and learning method are more satisfied and get more out of their studies than the students from the control cohort following a more traditional approach.

It is important to note that student feedback for all the key questions related to the testing of the new method reveals a doubling of appreciation of the teaching and learning methods (Questions 1 to 4), workload (Question 11) and quality of content (Question 12). Considering that the majority of students are already HR professionals, to receive such a high evaluation of the module; interesting (86%), met students' expectations (81%), is a considerable accomplishment especially when compared to the evaluations of the control group; 43% and 43%.

5.1. Quantitative Commentary

Both student cohorts are quite small. The pilot Cohort A consists of 21 respondents and the control Cohort B consists of 23 respondents. This is an important factor limiting the reliability and validity of empirical research findings. The presented statistical analysis therefore is limited to the measures of central tendency in student responses and their dispersion.

The most important aspects of the student evaluation are the use of teaching and learning methods (Questions 1 to 4), workload (Question 11) and quality of content (Question 12). For all these questions the mean for the pilot Cohort A is consistently higher than that for the control Cohort B, with the standard deviation being unfailingly lower for Cohort A (Table 2).

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation for each question of the questionnaire.

Questions	Cohort A (pilot)		Cohort B (control)	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
1. The learning and teaching methods used in lectures helped my learning	4.76	0.44	4.35	0.49
2. The learning and teaching methods used in tutorials helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
3. The learning and teaching methods used in seminars helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
4. The learning and teaching methods used in practical work helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
5. The tutor used a range of different learning methods in this module	4.81	0.40	4.43	0.51
6. There were adequate resources available in the library for this module	4.57	0.51	3.96	0.71
7. IT facilities were adequate for this module	4.62	0.50	3.83	0.72
8. The support materials made available for this module helped my learning	4.76	0.44	4.35	0.49

Table 2. *Cont.*

Questions	Cohort A (pilot)		Cohort B (control)	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
9. The learning and teaching methods used in lectures helped my learning	4.76	0.44	4.35	0.49
10. The learning and teaching methods used in tutorials helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
11. The learning and teaching methods used in seminars helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
12. The learning and teaching methods used in practical work helped my learning	4.81	0.40	4.35	0.49
13. The tutor used a range of different learning methods in this module	4.81	0.40	4.43	0.51
14. There were adequate resources available in the library for this module	4.57	0.51	4.22	0.42
15. IT facilities were adequate for this module	4.62	0.50	4.17	0.39
16. The support materials made available for this module helped my learning	4.76	0.44	4.35	0.49
17. I was given sufficient notice of timetabling arrangements for this module	4.48	0.51	4.35	0.49
18. I was given sufficient notice of other practical arrangements for this module	4.48	0.51	4.43	0.51
19. The workload was manageable for this module	4.81	0.40	4.43	0.51
20. The module content was pitched at the right level	4.81	0.40	4.43	0.51
21. I found the module interesting	4.86	0.36	4.43	0.51
22. The module content met my expectations	4.81	0.40	4.43	0.51
23. The feedback I received from tutors on my work during this module was helpful and aided my learning	4.86	0.36	4.43	0.51

Legend: Strong Agree—5; Agree—4; Neither Agree nor Disagree—3; Disagree—2; Strongly Disagree—1.

5.2. Qualitative Comments

The qualitative descriptors sought by Questions 16, 17 and 18 are presented verbatim in Table 3. These are all the available students comments presented with one comment line per student.

Even a quick look at both cohorts' responses to question 16 displays the richness of Cohort A's feedback, pinpointing the key elements of the new teaching and learning method based on reflective practice and comparative situational analysis of work-related issues in relation to the relevant theory. It is difficult to describe the effectiveness of classroom learning better than in the words of one student who is "*Able to use chance at Uni to reflect and understand why we do what we do at work in HR…all makes sense now*".

Cohort B's responses are certainly less emotional and showed more attempt to identify elements of the module's delivery ("Group discussions", "Enthusiastic lecturer") which were helpful.

5.3. Staff Observations

It was noted that these part-time professional students have good attendance compared to reports in the literature [6]. The part-time professional students in this study were rigorous in their attendance at all the sessions leading up to the due date for the assignment and even after that their attendance was consistent with the pre-submission period. In comparison the attendance of a full-time group appears to be fairly steady throughout the semester with a reduction approaching deadlines and after. Therefore it can be concluded that the suggested mode of incorporating weekly work on an assignment to enable

practice driven discussions was both effective and appreciated by students ("*Assignment great…did it as we went along!*", Table 3).

Table 3. Qualitative comments.

16. What did you find most useful about this module?
Cohort A (pilot):
Teaching methods and use of reflection activities
Assignment great…did it as we went along!
Able to get the answers through following our own thought process
Investigative discovery at work, using what we already know at work and bringing it into Uni
Practical use of theory and practice in the workplace
Lecturer lead us well but guided our discussion rather than overpowering control and direction
Able to use chance at Uni to reflect and understand why we do what we do at work in HR…all makes sense now
Sessions really hands on and great fun
Cohort B (control):
Group discussions
Tutor encourages learning
Enthusiastic lecturer
Looking at different topics with different eyes
Handouts and presentation of topics
Developing my own opinion
Different topics
17. What did you find least useful about this module?
Cohort A (pilot):
It ended….
Cohort B (control):
<no comments>
18. Are there any changes you would recommend making to this module?
<no comments>

In order to facilitate more interaction and collaboration amongst each cohort, a Wiki was used alongside a standard Blackboard environment. Wiki is not a new technology in learning but its capacity to share and update subject related material enabled students to create a comprehensive data set around the discussions of the module subject areas. It also fitted with the students' wish to use "real world" technology, perhaps because the majority of companies use collaboration-facilitating technology of some sort. However, it was noticed that while students did make use of Wikis their preferences were for the in-class group discussions as shown in the student evaluation ("*Able to get the answers through following our own thought process*", Cohort A; "*Group discussions*", Cohort B).

Another point worth mentioning is the sensitivity of the part-time professional students to the learning methods used by the tutor. Cohort B followed a more traditional approach using a combination of lecture and tutorial which meant that they were limited in exploring the intricacy of the

subject under consideration. The learning process of Cohort A involved preparation time using evidence from their own workplaces followed by interactive group work to analyze and solve the problems identified, and reached conclusions through discussion of facts brought in from their workplace. In this way it was much easier for students to relate the material discussed to the findings offered by theory, reflected in the students' comments that their classroom experience helped their practice.

A further aspect deserves comment: the use of reflective practice as a first step in enabling practice-driven learning. The students shared the sense that initially writing a one page description of the situation or policy in question was a challenging task, often requiring students to separate emotions from facts and put it in the dry context of company policy. However with the help of weekly exercises and formative feedback from tutor and peers writing reflectively became less demanding and more stimulating and even helped them to develop a more critical view of particular issues [7].

6. Conclusions

While there is a noticeable increase in the popularity and demand for part-time education there are certain challenges in organizing the teaching and learning process for part-time students. The primary cause of the challenges is arises from the fact that the majority of part-time students are already in full-time or part-time employment. This creates numerous pressures, often rationalized as competing priorities for the time and attention of learners who try to balance work, study and personal life. As a result of this need to balance competing priorities learning for the part-time professional is often characterized by lack of engagement.

The main challenge for effective learning by the part-time professional in our view is the diminishing relevance of the course content and delivery. The prevailing approach to teaching in higher education relies heavily on pushing students to learn theory and/or research findings by heart, while delivery often follows the lecture plus tutorial or seminar pattern. The widely expressed concern is that for part-time students exposed to the reality of modern working in organizations practice might appear to be very disconnected from theory. This could negatively affect the understanding of theory and overall learning by part-time professionals. The proposed solution to enable more engaged learning by HR and other professionals is an approach based on a combination of situational analysis of workplace data relevant to the syllabus with guided reflective practice. This enables students to perform a comparative situational analysis of theory and practice, where the latter is represented by data from their own and their peers' workplaces.

The proposed approach has been piloted with a cohort of part-time HR students and found to be more effective compared to a more traditional approach delivered by the same tutors to a different cohort of students. There was a noticeable increase in student engagement with the subject, an observation supported by students' appreciative feedback on the delivery of the module and its content. Given the increasing popularity and the challenges of ensuring relevant and engaging provision of part-time education it is argued here that contemporary teaching in higher education needs to be both applied and theory led.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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