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Chapter 6

Organisational Cultures and the Role of Learning Agreements

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Organisational Cultures and the Role of Learning Agreements

Jonathan Garnett

Introduction

The use of learning contracts or learning agreements as a mechanism to facilitate learner managed learning and as a valuable learning exercise in its own right is no longer novel. Laycock and Stephenson (1993) illustrates a wide range of different types of learning agreements. Typically they are negotiated between students and staff and cover the timing, type and amount of study to be undertaken and how it is to be assessed. Discussion of the role of the employer in the negotiation of such agreements in relation to work based programmes of study has tended to focus on student placement (eg. Stewart-David 'Learning Contracts and Student Placement with Employers' in Laycock and Stephenson). In the context of work based learning (structured learning from experience while in paid or unpaid work) at Middlesex University, the learning agreement is wider in scope and of fundamental importance as it not only provides a mechanism for the academic validation of individually customised programmes of study but it should also result in the employer (or other sponsor eg in the case of voluntary work) being a full partner in shaping the programme. The major role for the employer in programme design, as formalised in the learning agreement, is key to the Middlesex concept of Work Based Partnerships. This chapter will highlight how the learning agreement provides a mechanism for meeting the needs of the employer as well as the individual learner and the University. The Middlesex experience suggests that the culture (way of life pervading structures, systems, operations and values and outlook) of the partner organisation will greatly impact upon the nature of the learning agreement and its subsequent operation.

Contracting with the Gods

The four cultures identified by Handy in 'The Gods of Management' (1979) and 'Understanding Organizations' (1993) have been used as a starting point to explore the impact of different cultures upon the learning agreement. In brief the cultures are:

1. The power culture (Zeus, King of the Gods). This type of organisation has few rules or written procedures, it depends upon a central power source which often relies upon personal conversation for communication. Often found in small entrepreneurial organisations.

The will of Zeus must be reflected in any learning agreement signed by this type of organisation. However Zeus may not wish to be constrained by a written learning agreement.

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2. The role culture (Apollo, God of Reason). Separate departments with specialist functions and well developed rules and procedures predominate. Power rests upon position within a well defined and stable environment. The culture of large organisations where economies of scale are more important than flexibility eg large public bodies.

The structure and control provided by a formal agreement fits well with this culture but it is likely that the agreement will have to embrace more than one separate department within the organisation, typically the Personnel Department and the Department where the individual learner works.

3. The task culture (Athena, Goddess of War). A team culture focused on getting a specific task done. The culture is flexible and responsive to change.

Working with this type of partner organisation can test the flexibility of the learning agreement to the limit. Authorisation of the agreement on behalf of the employer can be problematic as the learner is likely to change work group during the period covered by the agreement. A future project leader may not wish to be bound by an agreement to which they were not a party.

4. The person culture (Dionysus, God of the self-orientated individual). The organisation exists only to serve the individuals within it eg partnerships of professionals.

There may be no separate employer interest to take into account in the learning agreement, it would be for the learner to ensure that the programme was designed to provide professional as well as personal development. When negotiating agreements the University must be able to distinguish between individuals genuinely working in an organisation with a person culture and those who are not but aspire to.

The impact of these cultures upon a learning agreement drawn up for a complete programme will be examined under the following headings: Content; Pace and Duration; Resources; Assessment; Outcomes; and, Quality.

Programme content

The learning agreement offers the learner the opportunity to plan the content of their own programme and thus ensure that it is relevant to their own personal and professional needs. The potential advantages of encouraging students to focus on their own learning needs and take responsibility for their own learning are well documented (eg. Anderson, Boud and Sampson, 1996). In relation to work based programmes at Middlesex the programme is likely to include individual experiential or training based learning which has been accredited. Thus the student is clearly identifying the relevant learning which has already been gained which they see as an intrinsic part of the programme they are designing. From the student's point of view this offers the opportunity to shorten the projected programme by getting due recognition for learning already achieved and ensures that the programme will not include irrelevant or repetitious material. The student must also satisfy the University in respect of the academic level, scope and overall academic coherence of the programme. At Middlesex, all individually negotiated programmes are considered for approval by the Work Based Learning Studies Programme Approval Panel which considers the learning agreement put forward by the student. Only learning agreements which already have employer approval will be considered by the Panel.

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In order to satisfy the needs of the employer in respect of the content of the programme, it is our experience that the learning agreement must not only clearly demonstrate that the programme will contribute to the personal development of the individual employee but that the outcomes of the programme will directly relate to organisational objectives. For example a work based postgraduate scheme with Bovis Construction included portfolio development centred upon accredited organisational core competencies (Garnett, 1998). The competencies are central to effective management performance and the basis for appraisal within the organisation. Through research carried out by the training manager the organisation was aware that this approach dramatically increased employee awareness and understanding of the competencies (Comerford, 1998).

The individual learner may need the help of the University in moderating the impact of Zeus should he try to take complete control of the programme. This can be a delicate balancing act as while senior management support is highly desirable it cannot be allowed to dominate the programme to such an extent that the learner no longer feels ownership of the programme or the programme does not meet the academic requirements of the University. Organisations with well developed role or task cultures are likely to support these with training programmes and employer defined core competencies. The organisation is likely to require that these be incorporated into the programme. Individuals operating within task cultures are those most likely to see their work as a series of projects which could be developed into the work based projects required within a Work Based Learning Studies programme. Role cultures may not always allow the individual the range or depth of work necessary for sustained higher level learning. In such cases the learning agreement may have to secure for the individual the right to operate beyond their normal role within the organisation.

Programme pace and duration

The learning agreement provides the mechanism for the learner to establish the pace of study and thus the duration of the programme. Individual circumstances and corporate priorities can thus be accommodated. This approach requires the University to move away from the concept of a normal period of registration for an award to one of considering each proposal on its merits. This is significant as it is a practical manifestation of the change in educational philosophy from imparting knowledge which the learner must assimilate and regurgitate within a fixed period of time to one of facilitating a self-managed learning process. This change forces University administrative procedures to adapt to the needs of the learning process rather than the other way round. The learning agreement thus becomes a key administrative document for student records and tracking.

Organisations with a role or individual culture find it easiest to cope with the advanced planning aspect of the learning agreement. A benevolent Zeus can also be a comfortable partner. Task cultures are consistently the most demanding environment to plan an academic programme within as the programme must always be subordinate to the work task. Thus even, as is usually the case, when the work task is also a project within the programme it must be conducted at a pace and within a timescale which meets the needs of the organisation.

Programme resources

The learning agreement provides the opportunity for the student to identify and argue a case for access to appropriate University and Employer learning resources. The use of employer learning resources is a critical dimension of a true work based learning partnership as it recognises the employer as a potential owner of learning at higher education level. This learning might be embedded within the operational requirements of a particular workrole (Brennan and Little 1996),

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the product of structured training courses or employer devised learning resources eg computer based training. Such resources are not only add to the extent and richness of the curriculum available to the work based learner they also provide learning which is likely to be highly significant and relevant to the employer. The incorporation of such resources into a broader structured programme is likely to add value to the learning experience concerned as what might have been an isolated training course now becomes a full part of a longer term structured learning experience with clearly defined and assessable outcomes. Employer learning resources might simply take the form of documents, reports or procedural handbooks. Such documents may be of a confidential or commercially sensitive nature and negotiation of access and the conditions under which such material can be used are important parts of negotiating the learning agreement with the employer.

In power cultures the will of Zeus or his trusted acolyte is vital to identify and harness appropriate employer resources. Role cultures are likely to provide easy access to resources within the same department but access to information or expertise in other departments is likely to require higher level negotiation between departments. Task cultures will often already have access to all the resources needed to tackle the work task and thus winning resources to support the programme is usually straightforward provided that the programme clearly contributes to the work task. Learners within the person culture will normally have control or access to the resources of the workplace.

Programme assessment

At Middlesex all work based programmes include at least one major negotiated work based project (see chapter 7). Students are given outline shell modules which contain a standard pattern of and weighting of assessment for a project module of a given size eg 40 credit points at level 3 would normally require a 7500 to 8000 word project report and a twenty minute presentation with questioning from assessors and peers. The objective of all work based projects is to produce a product of value to a specified target group. This might simply consist of the project report eg a report on preparing an organisation to apply for Investor in People status but often there will be a usable product eg a handbook to guide construction managers building a particular type of store which would be accompanied by a commentary aimed at the University audience to explain the research approach, activity and findings which led to the particular product in the particular form. In such cases the level of planning, communication, analysis, synthesis and originality demonstrated in the actual product may warrant a reduction in the size of the accompanying commentary.

Work based learning at Middlesex encourages collaborative projects, especially where these represent a natural team approach to a work task. In such a case the learning agreement must provide a convincing rationale for collaborative work and outline the form and the anticipated product of the collaboration. The rationale would need to embrace not only the complementary skills, knowledge and opportunities available to the group but also the potential creative tensions and learning opportunities from working with another person who may well have a different educational background, different workrole and different perspectives. In our experience the social dimension of most forms of work mean that in a sense all work based projects are collaborative. However, not all the active and interested parties wish to gain a University qualification (see chapter 8). Thus the factors identified above are likely to be relevant to most work based learners whatever the predominant organisational culture.

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Programme outcomes

The key outcome determined by the learning agreement is both the level (eg. Degree, Masters) and specific title of the qualification awarded as the result of successful completion of the programme agreed as the result of the approval of the learning agreement. At Middlesex all work based programmes carry a generic title of Work Based Learning Studies followed by a bracket containing the customised title reflecting the focus of the specific programme eg MA Work Based Learning Studies (Construction Management) or BA Work Based Learning Studies (Driver Education). This is an important aspect of the negotiation process and one which all the signatories have a strong direct interest in. Customisation of the title is often a key mechanism for extending ownership and participation in programme design to the learner and the employer. The individual and the employer want a qualification which will be recognised as high status and thus will be marketable in their professional area. The University must ensure that the title accurately describes the programme and is consistent with the requirements of the award/title to be awarded.

The Middlesex Learning Agreement content guide requires the learner to identify and explain the significance of outcomes at the level of the programme. In order to satisfy all signatories of the learning agreement, outcomes will relate not only to individual personal and career goals but also to employer objectives. Clearly it is a reasonable expectation that the employer will benefit in a general sense from the personal development of the employee but in our experience the tangible benefit of the project, a focused piece of research and development leading to a useable product, is at least as significant in convincing the employer of the value of the programme.

For example while an individual student might identify personal development outcomes in relation to:

- appreciation of the link between past achievements, current responsibilities and potential future directions;
- improved understanding of research methodology relevant to a specific interest;
- improved understanding and application of the principles of project management;
- extended writing skills and experience;
- refined knowledge and skills in a specialist area.

Corresponding programme outcomes to meet the objectives of the employer might be:

- providing a cost effective route for staff to gain appropriate academic qualifications;
- development of resources at published standards;
- exploration of work-oriented research methods;
- application of project management process to working methods;
- exploration of models of practice development which will sustain the benefits of training programmes through into work practice.

Individual and organisational outcomes are likely to be almost identical in person culture organisations. Role cultures are likely to have well worked out departmental objectives and plans to which the programme can contribute. The contribution of the programme to attaining objectives

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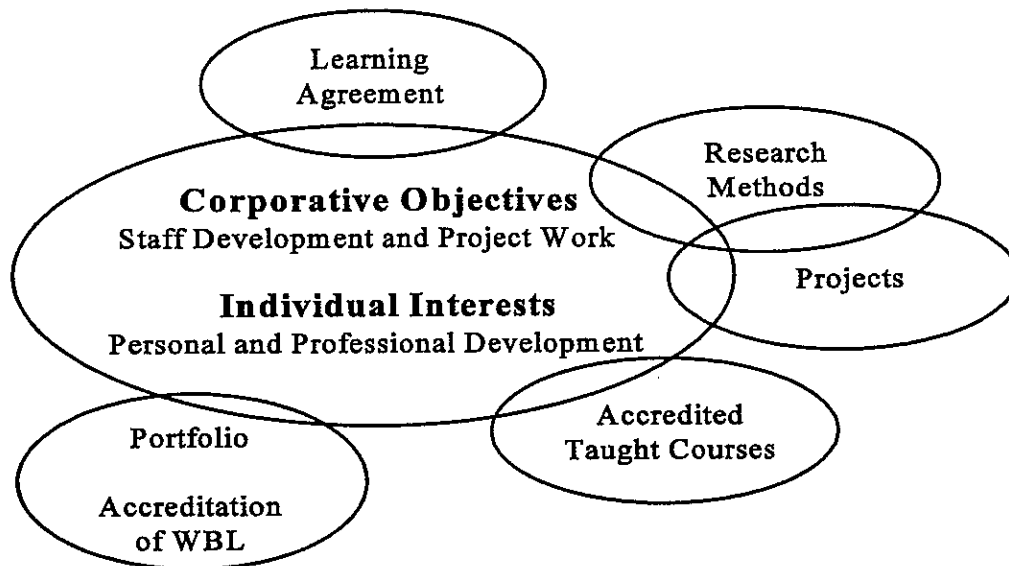
within a task culture may also be evident. Employer objectives under a power culture are less likely to be formally defined and may require direct commune with Zeus in order to ensure that the programme is in accordance with his plans.

Programme quality

The learning agreement has the potential to act as a yardstick to measure the quality of individually negotiated programmes as it formally defines not only the programme content but also the desired outcomes. The learning agreement provides the rationale for programme level and coherence and is thus central to consideration of the quality of the academic award. At Middlesex this role is recognised by using the learning agreement as the basis for consideration of the programme by the Work Based Learning Studies Programme Approval Panel. It is the role of the Panel to scrutinise the planned programme and confirm that its successful completion will result in sufficient work at the required level(s) for the desired target qualification. Successful completion is a matter of assessment and thus comes within the authority of the Work Based Learning Studies Assessment Board. The Work Based Learning Studies Programme Panel formally acts as a sub-group of the Assessment Board within rules for membership and terms of reference approved as part of the validation by the University of the Work Based Learning Studies framework. It is important to remember that the University is not the only signatory to the learning agreement with an interest in quality. Clearly the individual learner is also interested not only in the quality of the award but also the quality of the student experience. As the learning agreement provides the learner with direct input into the nature of that experience it also makes the learner a stakeholder in ensuring quality instead of just being a passive consumer. The employer also has a full role as stakeholder in the programme and hence in its quality. The employer will not only have played a full part in the design of the programme through negotiation of the learning agreement but also provides the learning environment for the work based programme. This may involve direct responsibility for delivery, assessment and quality assurance of part of the programme eg an accredited training course. As the work based projects are intended to be of direct relevance to work and often represent commissioned pieces of research and development activity, the organisation has two types of interest in the quality of the programme. The first relates to the quality experienced by the learner, the second relates to the quality of the project (often a product) and its fitness for purpose by the organisation. Different types of organisation are likely to attach differing importance to these two types of quality issues eg for Dionysus (person culture) the experience of the individual will be all important while for Athena (task culture) the contribution of the work based project to the needs of the organisation is likely to be all important. A model of Academic Work Based Learning Programmes which meet the interests of employers and employees is given in Figure 6.1 (see also chapters 5 and 7 for details of some of its elements).

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Figure 6.1: Model of Academic Work Based Learning Programmes



Dynamics of control and negotiation

The use of the three way learning agreement to involve the employer in programme design and thus as a major stakeholder in the programme brings a new set of interests and power relationships to curriculum design, delivery and assessment. A Work Based Learning Studies programme at Middlesex challenges not only the individual learner but also the University to identify the needs of the employer and determine how they can best be met within a programme which also meets the needs of the learner and the requirements of the University. The employer is likely to be in a powerful negotiating position, especially if the programme is drawing heavily upon employer learning resources and is being fully financed by the employer. Under such circumstances, and especially in organisations with strong power or role cultures there is a danger that the individual learner will feel that their programme is being dictated by the employer and thus that they have very little stake in it. Such a dominant position for the employer is undesirable as it mitigates against the considerable benefits of learner managed learning. Thus it is vital that the role of the University in the negotiation of the learning agreement extends beyond maintaining the quality of the award to protecting the potential quality of the student experience by promoting and facilitating the opportunity for learner managed learning.

Conclusion

The introduction of the employer as a full participant in the negotiation and agreement of a work based programme of study has the potential to make a fundamental impact upon the use of the learning agreement as a mechanism to facilitate learner managed learning. The employer dimension can greatly enrich the programme by adding new dimensions for consideration, new resources and learning opportunities. There is also the danger that the needs of the organisation may stifle the requirements of the individual learner and thus detract from the programme. The University has

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a key role in trying to maximise the potential advantages of employer involvement whilst safeguarding against inappropriate subordination of the individual learner to the expressed will of the employer. This process of negotiation and balancing of legitimate concerns and interests is greatly facilitated by recognising that employers are not a homogeneous category and that due regard and sensitivity to organisational culture is likely to have a significant influence upon the development of a successful learning agreement.