

# When theory meets practice

Some of the most fruitful academic learning occurs when workplace experience and university tuition come together.

**Helen Green** talks to four education professionals taking part in work-based learning

**C**oralie Frances is a teacher, but her students aren't children – they're training to be dental hygienists and therapists and Coralie, a practising hygienist herself, has been filming some of her sessions with them.

It's part of a work-based learning experiment enabling three tutors of post-compulsory education to improve their teaching, using camcorder filming instead of live observations.

Project leader Sai Loo, post-compulsory PGCE tutor, explains: "We use video to get them to be aware of their learning

approaches. They watch the film with their peers and look for good things to hold onto and strategies to improve their teaching practice."

Coralie, who filmed her students taking case histories from each other, feels there are many advantages: "You can see how the students were reacting and how you came over to them. You've got a record of exactly what you did – the film tells all."

The project is being funded by the Institute's Centre for Education in Work-based Learning for Education Professionals

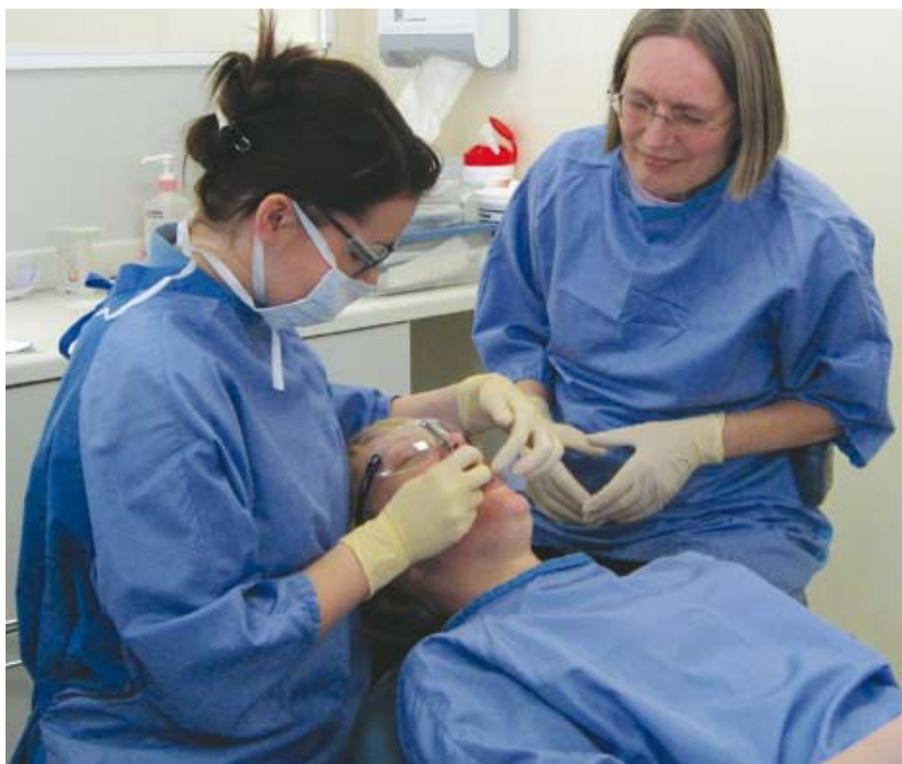
(WLE Centre), set up in 2006 to develop better understandings of the ways in which people learn through everyday work practices. Co-director Norbert Pachler says: "It bridges the gap between learning in the workplace and in a university and can provide learning opportunities for educational professionals from all walks of life."

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Co-director Karen Evans adds: "Rather than starting with subject knowledge and seeing how it can be applied to work environments, work-based learning programmes take everyday work practices as their starting point and enhance them with intellectual and other resources to deepen and expand the workplace learning."

Students on the EdD (Doctor of Education) programme are all practising teachers, lecturers and educationalists who base their doctoral research in an aspect of their own teaching situation.

Andrea Kelly, education policy adviser for the Royal College of Surgeons, was charged with developing a curriculum for the education of surgeons, something new to the profession, as surgeons were used to learning on the job. "The ethos used to be apprenticeship, rather than structured educational programmes," she says, "You didn't talk about syllabus or curriculum. And the rhetoric was that if the assessment was right, the learning would follow."



**Coralie Frances (right) coaching two dental hygiene students**

But the European Working Time Directive prompted a reorganisation of training along curricular lines, and, as with education, the government set numerous targets for the NHS to meet. “I needed expert advice on how to construct a surgical curriculum,” says Andrea. So she decided to do the Institute’s EdD.

“Work-based learners are encouraged to evaluate theory through their practice,” says Karen Evans. “The EdD is an example of a practitioner doctorate, and these already have many of the features of work-based learning.”

Since obtaining her EdD in 2005, Andrea has increasingly been asked to advise surgical bodies overseas on curriculum development. She has also become an associate of the WLE centre, as part of a group interested in setting up a forum for people with medical and clinical backgrounds.



Andrea Kelly takes a break in the operating theatre



Another member of the group is Dave Sims (left), who runs a degree course for social workers at the University of Greenwich. Dave

entered the EdD programme to both extend his knowledge and develop his teaching skills. “I’m very committed to the role universities can have in the development of practice,” he says. Karen Evans agrees: “Work-based learning increasingly refers to a new generation of higher education programmes that bring together universities and external organisations to create new learning opportunities in the workplace. Innovations in this area are extending this idea to ask whether and how best employees can undertake study for a degree, diploma or other forms of credit primarily in and through their workplaces, using the learning opportunities that arise from normal work.”

Dave has completed his thesis on the experiences of people who have taken a course training them to be both a nurse and a social worker. He says the joint training was a “fantastic vision”, but when they went into practice, the reality was different. They found they had to choose

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one role and were unable to get the training they needed to retain the other. He says his research “broadened my understanding of the impact of initial training and the limitations that can be placed on practitioners to practise holistically – managers couldn’t recognise that someone could be a nurse and a social worker as well.”

He is pleased that the WLE Centre strengthens the links between practice and theory. “What motivates me is to feel I’m contributing to practice: my head is in the university, but my heart is in practice,” says Dave.

One means of facilitating study for people working while learning is e-learning, and one example is the Master of Teaching (MTeach), which is mainly accessed online.



Robert Graham (left), who teaches ICT at Shenfield High School in Essex, had been teaching for one year when he took up the MTeach,

which he welcomed as an opportunity to look at ways of improving his practice. “You do your training and suddenly you’re a qualified teacher,” he explains.

They have face-to-face meetings one evening a month, when their tutor travels to the school to give a session. “We go over the theory and brainstorm ideas,” says Robert. In between they use a virtual learning environment. “We’re set tasks, which we place online, and we have an online dialogue with the others. You can take time in the working day or do it in the evenings,” says Robert. “It’s available 24/7.” ■

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