

Degree Apprenticeships: Autoethnographic Insights into Academic Support for Degree Apprenticeships

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Abstract

Degree apprenticeships combine academic study with practical work-based training, providing individuals with the opportunity to gain a degree while developing within the workplace. Apprenticeships offer organisations the opportunity to develop a skilled, engaged workforce tailored to their specific needs, ensuring a strong alignment between employee skills and workforce planning. Drawing on Vygotsky's social constructivism theory (1978), this study explores how academic support services scaffold apprentices' learning by bridging the gap between academic theory and workplace practice (Bockarie, 2002). This paper seeks to address the need to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of academic support within degree apprenticeship programmes by drawing on the autoethnographic insights of an apprenticeship course leader to explore the complexities of delivering academic support and asks: How do support services contribute to the success of apprentices in a UK degree apprenticeship programme? Through a critical examination of the course leader's experiences, this research highlights the tensions, and successes, encountered in designing and implementing support services that balance apprentice needs, academic study and workplace demands. This study is significant for practitioners, institutions, and employers, providing valuable insights into how support structures provide for the unique needs of degree apprentices.

Keywords

Degree apprenticeships • Autoethnography • Academic support • Workforce planning • Social constructivism

Introduction

Degree apprenticeships (DA) have become an integral part of the UK higher education landscape, offering learners the opportunity to gain academic qualifications while working in paid employment. October 2024 saw a third wave of investment funding in level 6 degree apprenticeships from the UK government (Office for Students, 2024) reflecting the increasing recognition of both the economic value of these programmes and the access to higher education opportunities they provide for underrepresented groups. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly there has been significant growth in the popularity and strategic importance of DA programmes (Bravenboer & Crawford-Lee, 2020) since their formal introduction in 2015 (Nawaz et al., 2023). However, the dual demands of employment and academic study present unique challenges for apprentices, requiring innovative and consistent academic support from universities to ensure apprentice success.

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore how academic support, through the role of academic tutor, can influence the experience and progression of apprentices.

As a course leader and tutor, I reflect on my own professional practice and the implementation of a new initiative designed to enhance apprentice engagement and achievement. Framed by Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (1978), this research considers how learning is socially situated and how support structures act as scaffolding to bridge the gap between workplace learning and academic development. The study also considers the alignment of broader institutional values of social justice and inclusion, recognising the role and importance of higher education in promoting equity and widening participation.

The research question guiding this study is: How do academic support services contribute to the success of apprentices in a UK degree apprenticeship programme? The research aims to identify the key considerations in providing support that addresses the needs of apprentices, employers, and academic institutions, and will provide actionable recommendations for enhancing support services to better facilitate apprenticeship success in the educational and workplace setting. By drawing on personal experience, institutional context, and relevant

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literature, this paper seeks to critically examine the relationship between policy, pedagogy, and practice in supporting apprentices and to offer reflections that may inform future enhancement of degree apprenticeship provision.

Conceptual Background

This review of literature critically explores the evolving landscape of DAs in higher education, with a focus on the role of academic support and pedagogical frameworks that underpin apprentice success. Grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1978), the review aims to establish a conceptual framework through which the reflective findings of this autoethnographic study can be understood.

The Duality of Degree Apprenticeships

DA programmes occupy a unique space between academic study and the world of work and employment, requiring the apprentice to navigate two distinct but interconnected environments, offering "significant potential benefits for organisations and individuals" (Higgs, 2022, p. 670). Whilst the delivery model may vary, DAs offer an "innovative type of programme that adopts a work-integrated approach to development" (Crawford-Lee, 2020) and represents the best of both worlds (Crawford-Lee, 2020, p. 2). Apprentices can gain a degree standard education whilst working in their chosen industry, gaining valuable skills and experiences without the burden of student finance loans and or additional debts. Engeli and Turner (2019) also found learners on degree apprenticeships valued the opportunity to study towards a degree alongside working in their chosen profession, developing valuable, competency-based knowledge, skills, and behaviours (KSBs).

Apprenticeships offer organisations the opportunity to develop a skilled, engaged workforce tailored to their specific needs, ensuring a strong alignment between employee skills and company goals functioning as a "vital pipeline for growing talents" in industry (Nawaz et al., 2023, p. 379). Whilst the value of degree apprenticeships to bridge societal skills gaps, provide organisations with skilled and engaged employees, they further provide opportunities for individuals which are well reported amongst the literature. The recent changes to UK government and apprenticeship policy have created uncertainty in the sector and in particular for those level 6 and level 7 programmes. Central to these reforms is the creation of Skills England that replaces the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education with a remit to meet the UK wide, industry skill requirement in the next decade with specific mention of the post-16 system (Department for Education, 2024a), arguably suggesting a shift towards foundational skills. Furthermore, in September 2024 it was

announced that the Apprenticeship Levy would be replaced with the Growth and Skills Levy, designed to offer employers more flexibility and redirect funding towards apprenticeships for young people (Department for Education, 2024b). Whilst level 7 apprenticeships have seen funding redirected to the aforementioned areas, level 6 degree apprenticeships continue to provide opportunities and access to education and widen participation. Whatever the future may bring for workplace learning and apprenticeships, it is the view of this paper that there is a need for a balanced approach to funding that supports both younger apprentices seeking entry-level opportunities and provision of advanced training to meet the diverse needs of the economy and to widen participation in degree education.

The balancing act of academic learning and the responsibility of employment not only provides the benefits that have been discussed but presents challenges and unique pressures. Such pressures require apprentices to develop resilience to meet the dual demands of learning and employment alongside developing reflective practice, that is a central component of effective apprenticeship learning (Rowle, 2019). Whilst the reputation of apprenticeships has moved forward since the 1980s Youth Training Scheme (YTS) there are still variable views regarding a degree apprenticeship versus a traditional university centred degree and such parental views on the suitability of an apprenticeship, are found to be influenced by "socio-economic factors such as economic status, educational status, age, and family structure" (Chadwick et al., 2024, p. 8). These perspectives may further impact apprentices as they move through their degree with the potential for the creation of further tensions in self-perception and support needs within their dual roles. Fabian et al. (2021) found that other challenges were experienced such as low wages, job insecurity following completion of the apprenticeship and support levels within the employing organisation varying sometimes resulting in a lack of support. Some research has reported that the development of quality degree apprenticeships can be challenged in how the curriculum is designed and delivered within programmes (Lillis & Bravenboer, 2020), in part due to degree apprenticeship regulations requiring institutions to step outside of the traditional semesterised delivery and consider how best to deliver the continuous learning required by the degree apprenticeship.

Degree Apprenticeship Identity

Degree apprenticeship identity (DAI) is "complex", and the concept of social identity is presented alongside professional identity, shown below in Figure 1 (Quew-Jones, 2024). The model was developed following research conducted with apprentices on the same type of DA programme that this autoethnography draws on albeit in a different institution. The DAI model provides a framework to support understanding

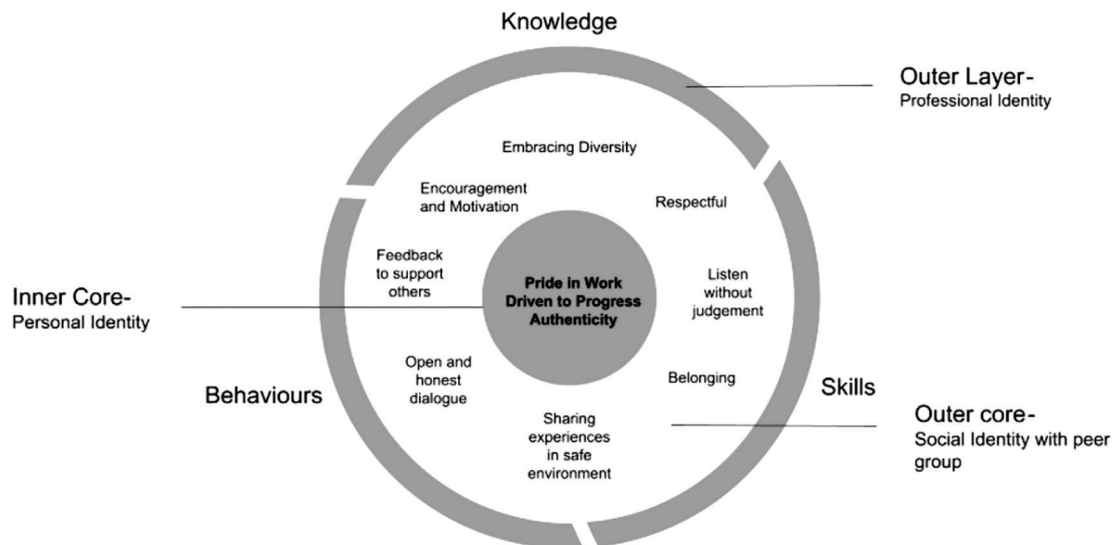


Figure 1. Degree Apprenticeship Identity Model.
Note: (Quew-Jones, 2024).

of how the apprentice forms their personal (inner core) and professional (outer layer) identity through the learning and experiences that they encounter during their apprenticeship, both within their workplace and within their learning organisation (Quew-Jones, 2024). Within this framework, identity formation can be considered as social and influenced by the experiences, influences and interactions aligning with the perspective of social constructivism and how those experiences, influences, and interactions can be facilitated by academic institutions.

This model is useful in supporting understanding of the duality of apprentices and furthermore the challenges that may influence the development of the personal and professional apprentice identity. The DAI framework recognises and highlights that social learning provides an opportunity for the development of effective interventions and supports the implementation of experiential learning and social learning opportunities (Quew-Jones, 2024, p. 1052).

The identified challenges emphasise the importance of appropriate and structured academic support, clear communication within the tripartite relationship and pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the social, and situated, communities that emerge.

Social Constructivism as a Pedagogical Framework

Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (1978) remains influential within educational theory and practice, particularly in its emphasis on the social nature of learning. A key element of this theory is the concept that knowledge is constructed socially through interaction with others, rather than transmitted from teacher to student in a passive manner (Vygotsky, 1978) and

therefore provides implications for how learning is structured in higher education and degree apprenticeships. This work is originally associated with childhood education, however, the core principles such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the associated scaffolding as illustrated in Figure 2 are equally relevant to adult learners in both formal and informal settings and has implications for the theory and practice of vocational and technical education (Bockarie, 2002). Hussein (2012) considers a constructivist approach to be a significant role in the process of learning to construct knowledge, finding also that learning activities that promote collaboration and co-operation promoted independent learning and improved social skills and behaviours.

Key elements of Vygotsky's framework such as the ZPD and the role of the more knowledgeable other (MKO) emphasize the importance of guided support. The Zone of Proximal Development represents a space in our learning – what we do not know – rather than a physical space (Taber, 2018) and denotes what can be learnt with guidance and support that includes MKOs, and technology and tools as explored in Figure 2. Social constructivism suggests that learning and knowledge comes from 'the outside in' and as such has implications for inclusion and widening participation through the recognition of the value of differing perspectives and the promotion of equity in classroom interactions and support services (Bassot, 2012). Therefore, it can be viewed as supporting societal values such as social justice and widening participation. This lens places learning as a collaboration between the learner, the learning institution and workplace culture, and social interactions, including those interactions with MKOs. Support systems are discussed within the next section.

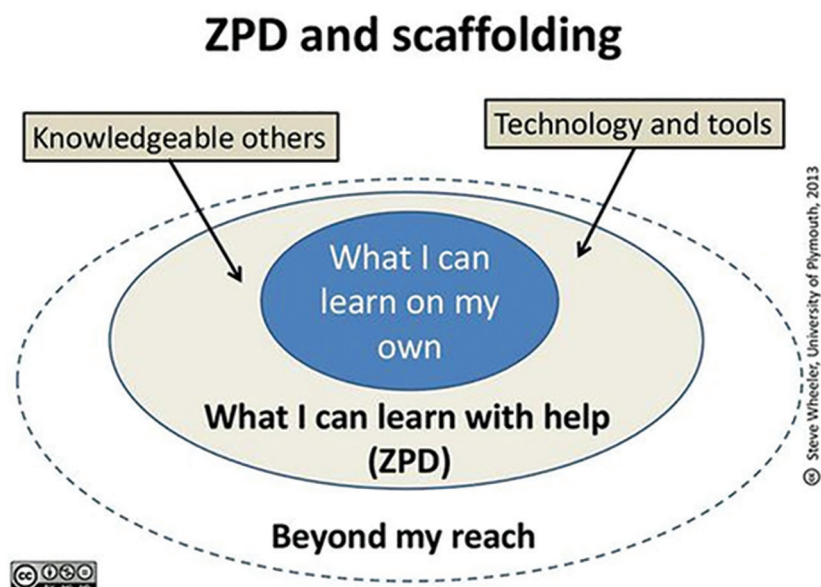


Figure 2. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.
Note: (Wheeler, 2013).

Apprenticeship Support Systems

On the whole, academic study as part of the apprenticeship is found to be “supportive, enjoyable, valuable (in terms of learning), and useful” (Fabian et al., 2021, p. 10) with some viewing support for apprentices as a shared responsibility between the institution and the employing organisation (Basit et al., 2015). Bravenboer (2016) suggested that the expertise of universities, alongside employing organisations, should be considered when designing degree apprenticeships and considered co-creation as beneficial. Whilst Universities now produce design narratives and drive forward the delivery models, Bravenboer (2016) highlights the importance of co-design. Tripartite consultations to gather feedback and future design ideas, promoting communication and collaboration between institutions and employers to ensure that academic support is aligned with the specific needs are suggested as beneficial to success (Lester, 2016). Employer engagement in the co-design can be “difficult” due to dynamic needs and other factors (Mulkeen et al., 2017). The emphasis on work-based training will necessitate close working relationships between employers and those involved in delivering the academic content of programmes. Work-based learning tutors (WBLT) could be considered as a crucial component of the creation of successful and “close working relationships” (Mulkeen et al., 2017, p. 345) between employers and universities. Nawaz and Edifor (2024) reported that 99% of training providers believe that it is important that lecturers and WBLT work together as a team. When interventions are required to improve outcomes for apprentices Doss et al. (2021, p. 77) found that

the successful interventions are tailored to the specific needs of the target group, and also that they support apprentices to identify their academic limitations and identify sources of support, further reinforcing the works of Vygotsky. One form of support that has been effective in supporting apprentices is scaffolding, which provides structured guidance as they develop independence and confidence (Bruner, 1978).

Support as Scaffolding

Scaffolding can be viewed as the support that is offered to learners to help them to problem solve and learn what they did not know and cannot solve alone (Bruner, 1978). For degree apprentices this support requirement is not confined to academic learning but rather it extends into the workplace, where the support may be provided by mentors, peers, and work-based learning tutors. However, for the purposes of this review the literature will relate to the requirement for academic support. Scaffolding is closely related to the ZPD and could arguably be viewed as part of the development offered by both the MKO and also a tool (technology and tool) that the ZPD model offers. It is viewed as a temporary means of supporting a learner that aims to improve their knowledge and create a “higher level of understanding”, reliant on effective communication and the use of language (Fernandez et al., 2002, p. 56). As the literature suggests, scaffolding not only supports student learning but also encourages confidence and self-efficacy, highlighting the relationship between structured support and developing positive learner identity and engagement.

This literature has highlighted the duality faced by degree apprentices as they develop their academic and professional identities (Rowle, 2019). This dual role creates both challenges and opportunities, reinforcing the need for structured and responsive support systems. Apprentices are found to develop through interaction with peers, employers, and academic and WBLT staff, and the Vygotsky's ZPD (1978) offers a framework for understanding how tailored support can enhance progression. Degree apprenticeships succeed when institutions recognise the social and developmental needs of learners, provide structured support, and embrace pedagogical approaches that align with the unique apprenticeship learning environments.

Method

Research Design

This autoethnographic study seeks to explore my lived experiences in the role of a degree apprentice course leader in order to understand how support services contribute to the success of apprentices in a UK degree apprenticeship programme. This study is underpinned by Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism (1978) to explore and frame how academic support services scaffold apprentices' learning by bridging the gap between academic theory and workplace practice (Bockarie, 2002). The data collection and analysis are centred on reflections regarding a significant change to academic support for degree apprentices within my institution. An autoethnographic research design allows me as author to adopt the dual role as both participant and observer within the broader societal culture and any subcultures that may be present throughout the research (Ellis et al., 2011). This duality in role is further emphasised when considering my role as course leader of a degree apprenticeship and the position (of potential trust and or influence) that places me within any created subculture groups emerging from the apprenticeship course. As a course lead, I am immersed within the cultural practices of the apprenticeship programme and therefore I recognise my influence and potential shaping of subcultures. This position offers a unique opportunity, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the interactions between my personal experiences and the collective dynamics of the wider apprenticeship group. This research seeks to offer insight and understanding of the complex layers of culture and interpersonal relationships within the apprenticeship setting, viewing the group as a community, and recognising autoethnography as both "process and product" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273).

This approach aligns with the principles of analytic autoethnography, where the researcher is a full member of the group under study and actively engages in reflexive analysis to connect their own personal narratives with the broader

cultural (and sub-cultural) contexts. By acknowledging the integral role that a course lead plays within the subculture, I have the opportunity to provide nuanced insights into both my own lived experiences and those of the participants of the degree apprenticeship programme (Adams et al., 2021).

Context

Apprentices had previously had the support of work-based learning tutors as a first point of contact and a facilitator of the tripartite relationship. Academic support was provided on a module-by-module basis. This study considers the implementation of a support system that retains the valuable work-based learning tutor and introduces an academic tutor for each apprentice to support academic learning and development. Tutors meet individually with apprentices three to four times per year, in person or remotely to develop "a personalised, purposeful and ongoing relationship" and is "one of the most impactful ways the University has of helping students achieve these aims and of adding value to their educational experience" (York St John, 2025). Tutors also work together to offer tailored support opportunities to groups of tutees that correlate with their current stage of study such as workshops to develop referencing skills for level 4 apprentices and employability and career progression for level 6 apprentices.

Data Collection

Drawing on my personal reflections, journals, and institutional outcomes data, the research employs a reflexive approach to analyse the relationship between individual experiences and systemic practices. Iterative reading, self-questioning and consideration of personal and cultural influences that may shape my interpretation combine to critically examine and analyse my narratives and reflections. The process of journaling promotes criticality in the experiences and decisions that the author has and make, and as such manages issues of potential bias. By considering the wider context and the potential influences that may be present in any given experience allows challenge to issues of unconscious bias and therefore produce more balanced decision-making and judgement (Newton, 2025). The value of this approach is in the "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher" to extend theoretical understanding" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21).

Data Analysis

By analysing personal narratives, the study highlights challenges and opportunities present for enhancing support services, offering a critical, practice-oriented perspective on apprenticeships. Vygotsky's theory (1978) guides the analysis and in particular the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding provide a lens through which to consider and examine the support

implemented. Thematic analysis is employed to identify themes and patterns within the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, one early entry reflected on a number of tutorials that I had held during the same day. I noted in the entry that the majority of the tutees did not engage with the institute's wider support systems such as Study Development and this was initially coded as 'engagement with services' which led to a consideration of the barriers to accessing such services. Reflexivity was employed to critically examine and interrogate my own biases and assumptions.

Reliability

Yin (1998) suggests that reliability is met by establishing a case study protocol that allows replication of the scope of the study. The basic study protocol required for this study requires that the study is confined to the work setting of the researcher, a reflective journal is kept systematically (two to three weekly journal entries during work periods) and considered alongside other sources of data which are analysed and used to inform ongoing practice, and finally that the narrative account is created based on the data collection and the conclusions drawn from that analysis (Duncan, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Autoethnographic research is an "ethically contested terrain" a contentious issue attracting much debate (Sparkes, 2024, p. 107). Whilst some may question whether ethical approval is appropriate or achievable, others take a pragmatic view, one shared by me as author, that each story that is told through autoethnography is truly individual and "unique," and therefore a unique view to the ethical considerations of each study must be adopted (Gibbs, 2018, p. 129). The recognition that the role of a course lead holds influence, and therefore, has influence within the subculture requires recognition of this position and an examination of the impact of such influence through a critical lens, therefore providing a rich and detailed understanding of the apprenticeship experience from the inside. Formal ethical approval was granted by the organisation the author works within.

Findings and Discussion

Background

Social constructivism and the importance it places on culture is something that resonates with me. Who we become, and who we become as learners is influenced and intertwined by the communities we belong to. I cannot recall a time when I did not believe that we learn and develop from our experiences, and from those who so generously share their time, knowledge and expertise with others. From the coble tractor driver, who on his breaks between hauling the small fishing boats out of

the sea, would share a tale (and occasionally a sandwich) with me as a child, to the academic mentor who has been by my side guiding, encouraging and supporting me through sharing their knowledge, experiences and understanding of the world, I am a product of these experiences: shaped by the people and the experiences that have brought me to this point. As a practitioner, my personal beliefs and social and cultural experiences have driven my approach to how I learn and how I support others. Marshman (2010) expresses this well encouraging individuals to become the very best or finest that they can be and enabling them to experience all they can from life and reach their goals (p. 3).

Holistic education reflects my pedagogical approach to my practice. The key strands of educating for development, educating a 'whole' person, a supportive classroom culture and encouraging students to develop meaning and understanding from a balance of taught content and experiential learning (Marshman, 2010, p. 3) align with my belief that we cannot truly learn and develop in isolation from the people, communities, and events around us. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is socially and culturally situated and therefore learning is influenced and shaped by interaction, support, and the wider context in which the learner is placed. Recall your school experiences and consider the teachers that were part of this: For me this is not entirely pleasant, but times were as they were back then. However, one teacher took time to understand who I was, the life that I had, and as a result I recall with a smile the impact that person had on my learning and my future. They had provided me with the confidence to take the next steps and that care for me as a 'whole' person resulted in success.

The Role of a Degree Apprentice Course Lead

On reflection, it is perhaps unsurprising then that I find myself leading degree apprenticeships within my institution. It could be considered that social constructivism shapes the concept of the apprenticeship journey and the learning that emerges from apprentices becoming immersed in both academic learning and theory within the classroom community, and the practice based, work community that provides on-the-job opportunities that allow knowledge, skills, and behaviours to develop. These two strands working together to guide and support apprentices through the sharing of information and knowledge, gently encouraging as confidence grows and independence develops, is at the heart of the concepts such as 'scaffolding' and 'more knowledgeable others'.

My involvement with the delivery of DAs began some years ago and demanded that I revisit my approach to delivering content and sharing knowledge. Apprentices bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the classroom, and I soon realised the dual nature of the relationship that would develop. On our first meeting there is that initial, inevitable period of

reserve and often silence that is found at the beginning of modules when students or apprentices are still figuring out the unspoken rules and boundaries of a newly formed learning community. I learnt within that first experience that the learning needs of apprentices are different to those of students who embark on the traditional route to gaining a degree. These traditional route students are able to immerse themselves in their new social setting, they can find their people and their communities and become a part of the culture that they find themselves within. However, for apprentices this becomes two-fold. They have two new communities, two new cultures to find their space within: their working role and the role as student. As such, the principles of holistic education (Marshman, 2010) became central to my practice.

The role of course lead is more recent, and I stepped into the role over 18 months ago. Previously, the apprentices had always shared their feedback honestly and often without boundaries. This now provides me with valuable empirical insights through a variety of regular apprentice feedback opportunities such as mid-module feedback, course representation, and discussions within the module and classroom environment, where suggestions are made as to how we can improve the programme further.

Social Constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The emphasis that Vygotsky's theories place on the value of interaction, language, and social tools for learning is incorporated into my pedagogy and I recognise the benefits of applying these core principles throughout our lives, not only to children, but in adulthood as we navigate new academic and professional challenges. In the context of apprenticeships, I recognise that adult learners engage in unfamiliar academic techniques and practices that provide challenges beyond their current knowledge and competencies. Some apprentices appear to find this aspect of their apprenticeship challenging. The connection between their role in the workplace and the requirement to be seen as competent by managers and colleagues is in juxtaposition to the role of student, where vulnerability can occur in accepting that there is much to learn. This tension between responsibility and expectation can be complex and challenging and apprentices will often express frustration at a perceived lack of recognition of the complexity of their situation. Some apprentices do not feel valued as students within their institution and as such it could be viewed as a barrier to the 'technology and tools' that sit within the ZPD. Previous research found apprentices define themselves in opposition to traditional student identities with participants considering themselves to be employees rather than students (Taylor-Smith et al., 2019) and this is something that emerged from my own analysis and reflection. However, it was the shared perspectives, conversations, feedback, and

reflections of apprentices that led to the introduction of the academic tutor provision for them with an aim to encourage student identity and provide scaffolding and access to the 'technology and tools' needed to further their learning.

As their course lead and tutor, I act as a 'more knowledgeable other'. A position of responsibility, trust, and relational influence, and I recognise that this role is one that has potential significance in apprentice development, both their academic identity and their professional identity. It is a role that I have not taken lightly, and I approach with intention and care, and on occasions can be consuming. My role is not only to provide support to apprentices to progress within their ZPD, albeit in a workplace-based higher education setting, but to facilitate opportunities for them to reflect on their starting point and existing competencies. I also recognise the need to develop a trusting community where the apprentices feel able to ask for the 'help' that they need to progress. It should be emphasised that I am not alone in providing these opportunities for our apprentices; I am part of a team. However, these reflections are my own.

The Role of the Institution

The institution I work within is strongly aligned with the principles of social justice and actively promotes social inclusion, demonstrated by a wide range of additional, excellent support services available to students, apprentices, and staff. This has significance for this project and for me personally. Looking back at entries in my reflective journals and also at entries on our integrated online platform (that monitors and tracks student support and engagement) I can see that the success of academic tutoring, whilst working in partnership with the wider university community, has a reliance on specialist support services. Successful tutoring appears to evolve from a collaborative effort: of apprentice, 'more knowledgeable others' such as tutors and lecturers, (Vygotsky, 1978, Wheeler, 2013) and the wider institutional culture. Every apprentice that has engaged with the newly implemented system of academic tutoring has at least once been signposted to other services and resources to further their learning. These technology and tools include but are not exclusive to academic librarian liaison, IT skills and digital skills, referencing, academic skills and research, wellbeing services including welfare advisor appointments, disability support and inclusion and learner adjustment plans. This engagement within the apprentices ZPD allows them to shift from what they can learn with help to a more independent what they can learn on their own.

The role of an academic tutor (AT) is regarded positively within my institution and students benefit from the consistent access to the same academic tutor (wherever possible) throughout the duration of their degree course. This additional workload for staff has been recognised and incorporated within workforce

planning and I feel my work in this area is supported and recognised. I mention this as without the access to continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities that consider the dynamic challenges that students and apprentices face in balancing personal, academic, and professional demands, I would face considerable challenges in providing effective scaffolding opportunities for the apprentices. The wider institution community values and provides opportunities for professional growth and development, further emphasising the importance of community in facilitating and influencing apprentices' progression and success.

It should be observed that prior to the introduction of academic tutors for the DA programmes, feedback from apprentices suggested that they were unsure where to seek support with some expressing that at times, they felt isolated. All apprentices complete an academic and programme induction at the beginning of their programme that introduces them to the excellent range of services and facilities that are available to them, however, as they embark on their learning journey, they require further support and signposting to access these services and to become more independent in their use of technology and tools.

Providing Academic Support as Scaffolding

Learning by doing is not simply a matter of letting learners loose and hoping that they discover things for themselves in a haphazard way through sudden bursts of inspiration (Gibbs, 1988, p. 19).

Scaffolding as a concept is often associated with ZPD yet does not appear within the model created (Figure 2: Vygotsky's zone of proximal development). It has however emerged as a go to technique within many educational settings, considered an effective strategy (Taber, 2018). It has particular relevance when considering the degree apprenticeship due to the duality of needs of both academic support and workplace learning and mentorship.

The nature and purpose of apprenticeships feel rooted within the concept of ZPD. Apprentices develop knowledge, skills, and behaviours through supported participation in real-world tasks in the employment setting. Our apprentices now receive support from a range of sources including academic tutors, work-based learning tutors, workplace mentors and managers, and peers and one aim of the initiative was to provide them with direct access to what they can learn with the help of academic specialists. The design narrative of this course facilitates this support being provided within both the work aspect and the academic aspect of their learning. We were mindful when we introduced the academic support provision to ensure that the role of the work-based learning tutor was not diluted. I do question how successful the rollout would have been in an institution where the academic team and the work-based team may work in silos and whether

resistance to the change may have occurred. However, we have worked well to remove any such barriers prior to the academic support initiative, and we are now well placed as one team rather than two. This may have been significant in the implementation of the changes.

Implementation of Academic Tutoring

We took the opportunity to publicise the initiative within all course material from onboarding webinars right through to the online community platform for our apprentices and the online course landing page. This approach was successful for our incoming apprentices, who adapted and accepted the structure of the course and very quickly knew which key people took what roles within their learning. However, the rollout of the introduction of academic tutors to existing year groups felt "messy". Apprentices reported to me feelings of confusion and there were initial expressions of "what's the difference between this and our WBLT". I had not been fully prepared for this and found myself spending more time than anticipated within the initial tutorials explaining to apprentices the purpose and benefits of ATs which was frustrating. Within these conversations it was useful to discuss scaffolding directly with apprentices as it was a powerful way to explain the purpose of the AT role and also provide insight into their own learning journey. My journal shows an entry written following the first few tutorials. In this entry I had written a working definition for my own benefit - "it is a way of supporting your learning, and your unique learning style, so that you can build up your skills and knowledge gradually. As we begin, I might give you more help and guidance but as you get more confident, that support will evolve and is slowly taken away, until you can do it on your own. It is a bit like the scaffolding around a building which is removed once the structure is strong enough to stand on its own." I revisited this entry many times, evidenced by the repeated circling of the statement with my pen, perhaps in some way reflecting the need to provide clarity, or perhaps reassurance.

More recently the entries within the journal appear to align with other available evidence, that apprentices have adapted to the change in support and many report positively on the impact it has made to their success. This success is evidenced within their summative grades and feedback, and, arguably more importantly, in the confidence they have in approaching their assessments. Individual tutorials allow for an exploration of progress and apprentices report that they do engage with the suggested university wide support services, and they can 'feel' how this benefits their development. I find myself recording "no concerns raised" frequently on our online platform and the tutorial time can be spent considering how to further improve the individual learning environment through more challenging opportunities and concepts. These benefits are transferable throughout the apprenticeship – there are increasing

interactions between apprentices during workshops, and they create informal collaborative opportunities during this time. The noise levels in shared classroom spaces have risen and I find it motivating to hear the chattering sound of the apprentices' sharing ideas and knowledge during the sessions. Whilst quantitative evidence is not yet available to consider the following issue, it does strike me that tutorials with module leads must also be impacted positively by the introduction of the initiative. I consider whether contacts with module tutors have become more meaningful as apprentices learn the skills and techniques to step away from the scaffolding provided and demonstrate independent learning.

Individual tutorials are enhanced by group tutorials. Group tutorials combine tutor support and encourage apprentices to share and consider the topics together, providing opportunities for peer support. It has been rewarding to see and hear the confidence and development of the apprentices increase over the months as individuals feel more able to adopt the role of MKO and offer their experiences and knowledge. These group tutorials are often online, and the topic is co-created with the apprentice group – often facilitated by the course representatives that represent the views of each cohort. The representatives meet with me monthly and we book a 30-minute meeting, however, recently we often find that the whole 30 minutes is not needed as issues appear to be arising less and less. Topics included in these meetings vary, however, they are a crucial feedback mechanism for evaluating the success of the initiative and the wider programme. We have built trust, and communication is honest and respectful, apprentices suggest improvements, opportunities, and in many ways act as a MKO for my own learning and shaping and improving my own practice. This dynamic further emphasizes the duality of the degree apprenticeship model that has been implemented. Although a few apprentices continue to be more challenging to engage, I believe they are now better supported through the new AT initiative. The initiative offers all apprentices a clear, open line of communication with their academic tutor and provides them with the technology and tools they need, should they feel ready to take that step. It is a timely reminder to me in the same way that learning is unique to each individual and learning environments must be flexible and varied, that engagement looks different for everyone, and our role as tutors is to ensure the door remains open. Throughout this autoethnographic process, I am reminded that learning is reciprocal, while I support apprentices in their academic and professional growth, they also share their knowledge and experiences and deepen my understanding of effective practice. Grounded in the principles of social constructivism, these reflections have emphasised the importance of scaffolding, trust, and shared responsibility in the learning journey. This reflective experience has also strengthened my commitment to reflexivity and understanding how I both affect the situation and am affected by the situation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of effective support in apprenticeship success, offering reflexive insights into the challenges and opportunities in an UK degree apprenticeship. In response to the overarching research question of how do support services contribute to the success of apprentices in UK degree apprenticeship programme, the study found the following.

Building trust and maintaining open, respectful communication between apprentices and tutors is central to engagement and success. Apprentices value consistency and continuity within their apprenticeship. This correlates to the overall institutional culture in which the degree apprenticeship is being delivered. The effectiveness of the initiative considered in this study was underpinned by an institutional commitment to social justice, inclusion, and the willingness to allocate appropriate resources to facilitate long-term, consistent, academic support.

Drawing on Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978), the use of scaffolding proved essential in supporting apprentices' academic development. Furthermore, the relationship between tutor and apprentice is not one-directional and apprentices often act as MKOs themselves, offering insights that shape and improve professional practice for tutors and other apprentices. The provision of technology and tools are required to facilitate the role of academic tutor and provide the specialist knowledge that apprentices require, highlighting the need for collaboration across the institution. Co-creation and peer learning also has a role in supporting apprentices to navigate the dual demands of study and work, reinforcing the importance of social learning environments.

Evidence from this study suggests that the introduction of academic tutors fulfils the institution's commitment to social justice and inclusion by providing consistent individualised support. This approach has been shown to enhance engagement, improve academic outcomes, and ensure apprentices feel more connected to both their learning and the wider university community. The findings suggest the importance of an integrated approach to academic support, ensuring that apprentices have access to the resources, services, and personnel, they need.

Implications for HRD Practice

This study provides valuable insights into how support structures are necessary to provide for the unique needs of degree apprentices. DA require innovative, institution wide approaches to academic support that aligns educational, workplace, career, and organisational goals. The findings offer valuable insights for human resource development practitioners and policymakers seeking to further improve

the relationship between academic institutions and employers, contributing to the development of a skilled and adaptable workforce.

The findings highlight the critical role HRD practitioners play in shaping the support structures that enable degree apprentices to successfully balance the dual demands of work and study. Practitioners should prioritise the development of inclusive mentoring frameworks, seeking opportunities for regular communication between academic institutions and employers, and advocate for practices that recognise the dual identity of apprentices as both learners and employees. By tailoring support to the unique challenges apprentices face, HRD professionals can positively impact retention, engagement, and long-term career development. This calls for a strategic shift toward a learner centred approach in HRD practices that align with both organisational goals and talent development strategies.

Limitations

This autoethnographic study is rooted in personal experience and reflection offering rich and meaningful insights yet introduces certain limitations. The findings are based on a single researcher's perspective and are therefore inherently subjective. Reflexivity was employed to critically interrogate biases; however, the interpretations remain influenced by my role, assumptions, and positionality within the institution.

This study was limited to one institution and a specific apprenticeship programme, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other settings or disciplines. This study captures a snapshot in time. Future internal and external policy developments may influence both the structure of support services and the experiences of those involved.

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