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Understanding Work-Based Learning

Edited by
SIMON ROODHOUSE
and
JOHN MUMFORD

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Defining and Theorizing University Work-Based Learning

SIMON ROODHOUSE

This chapter sets out to provide an explanation of the boundaries of work-based learning for the purposes of this book and the dominant theories underpinning the concept. These observations are then placed in the context of the institution, employer and individual as the key actors in the work-based learning story.

Definitions

Turning to ‘work-based learning’, as explained by Costley (2001), the term is part of a cluster of concepts, including ‘lifelong learning’, ‘employability’ and ‘flexibility’. Unwin and Fuller (2003), elaborate these distinctions by concentrating on workplace as opposed to work-based learning:

‘The term “workplace learning” is used to embrace all types of learning which are generated or stimulated by the needs of the workplace including formal on-the-job training, informal learning and work-related off-the-job education and training.’ (Unwin and Fuller, 2003, p. 7 cited in Evans and Kersh, 2006, p. 4)

Boud and Symes (2000, p. 14, cited in Evans and Kersh, 2006, p. 4) take this further by making a distinction between these two terms:

‘Work-based learning needs to be distinguished from work place learning, that form of learning that occurs on a day-to-day basis at work as employees acquire new skills to develop new approaches to solving problems. No formal education recognition normally accrues to such learning, whether or not it is organised systematically.’

One of the challenges which results from this is to attempt to introduce some clarity about what work-based learning at this level involves and the contexts in which it occurs:

‘It is evident there can be no single or simple definition of what work based learning entails beyond the notion that it is about learning (not teaching) and occurs in the workplace (rather than on campus). As such, work based learning can, and should be, distinguished from the notion of work related learning; the latter, in the form of vocational programmes designed to prepare people for employment which often includes employer-determined competencies e.g. national

occupational standards, and does not necessarily require significant areas of the curriculum to be completed in the work place itself. Neither should it be assumed that work based learning in the higher education context is specifically about training; work based learning may take many forms and be undertaken for a number of different purposes; it is not restricted to performance-related learning in a narrow sense. Instead, the emphasis is on identifying and demonstrating learning that has occurred through work based activity, wherever and however this may have been achieved.' (UVAC, 2005)

This position is underlined by the Higher Education Academy's guide to learning and employability:

'It is not necessarily the experience of work itself that is paramount – rather it is the learning that an individual derives from that experience of work and from reflecting upon it. A government-sponsored review recognised that work based learning could take many forms including a full-time undergraduate undertaking a work placement planned as part of the curriculum; a full-time undergraduate doing a part-time job; a full-time employee seeking to explore work focused and work-related issues in the context of the knowledge, skills and values of a higher education institution. The common factor linking these forms was that the individual would be doing a job of work, or would be undertaking a work role.' (Little and ESECT, 2004)

However, confusion remains over work-based learning terminology for employers and higher education, and as a result it is recognised as essential that a common language is established:

'... it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective, irrespective of the terms used.' (Nixon et al., 2006)

It is also clear that the work-based learning landscape has become more densely populated in recent years, with diverse partners, players and cultures now located on its territories. However, one concept that is frequently used in discussions of work-based learning is 'flexibility'; all organisations, including higher education, are expected to respond flexibly and rapidly to labour market changes. Flexibility may require working in partnership or collaboratively with other organisations in order to achieve desired goals most effectively. With this drive to create flexible organisations has come a corresponding emphasis on flexible learning, within and across organisations, which includes different learning levels, contexts, and modes of delivery and assessment methodologies.

As Garrick and Usher (2000) state:

'Organizations are expected to respond flexibly and rapidly to market changes and a premium is now placed on the need for flexibility not only within workplaces but also between them. Within this context are located interlinking discourses of flexible organizations, flexible workers and a consequent perceived need amongst managers (at a range of levels) for flexible structures, modes and contents of learning to service these organisations and workers.'

Flexible learning and work-based learning are used almost interchangeably by government agencies; for example, in a DfES White Paper (DfES, 2005) there is reference

to progression taking place through 'flexible, i.e. work-based learning routes'. Along with online and distance learning delivery mechanisms, work-based learning routes have come to be regarded as an important part of flexible learning processes.

Work-based learning is an emerging discrete university subject which is taught, studied and researched, 'a field of study', (Gibbs and Garnett, 2007, cited in Garnett, Costley and Workman, 2009, p. 3) in its own right. It is not a traditional part-time course undertaken whilst at work but rather:

'The demonstration of your ability to reflect upon your skills, knowledge and approach to your work, often called your 'professional practice'. In some situations, learners will develop occupational competence alongside the WBL programme and this is usually assessed separately by the employer,' (Durrant, Rhodes and Young, 2009, p. 2)

The emphasis in this model is on what has and can be learnt at work by carrying out the job, interacting with colleagues and identifying and reflecting on processes and procedures, the corporate memory relies on being employed. In this respect, employment is defined as:

- 'paid work;
- underpaid work, which could include voluntary work or working within a family business them receiving remuneration;
- full-time or part-time employment;
- self-employed workers and business owners – from actors, artists and builders to farmers, gardeners and restaurateurs.

In short, work-based learning is for anyone who is regularly engaged in work (or undertakes periods of contractual work sufficiently long enough to complete a programme of study), whatever the nature of that work.' (Durrant, Rhodes and Young, 2009, p. 19)

Some Theoretical Perspectives

This focus on the work-based or workplace learning has not unexpectedly been theorized. Much of the literature is derived from studies into different forms of learning which have been of interest to university Schools of Education, Adult and Continuing Education, Business, Management Studies and, more recently, newer higher education subjects such as nursing and allied health. The increasing interest in professional practice has also stimulated study and writing particularly about contextual knowledge and transfer (Evans, Guile and Harris, 2009). In addition, social scientists such as Bourdieu have been interested in the workplace practice culture and its relationship to theory.

Kolb, Schon, Boud and Eraut perhaps can be recognised as key thinkers and influencers in this field. Kolb developed the Experiential Learning Model composed of four elements:

- Concrete experience.
- Observation of and reflection on that experience.
- Formation of abstract concepts based upon the reflection.
- Testing the new concepts.

These four elements are the essence of a spiral of learning that can begin with any one of the four elements, but typically begins with a concrete experience. His model was developed predominantly for use with adult education, but has found widespread pedagogical implications in higher education.

Schon was largely responsible for introducing reflective practice which is a continuous process and involves the learner considering critical incidents in his or her life experiences. As defined by Schon, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline. In education, it refers to the process of the educator studying his or her own teaching methods and determining what works best for the students. He additionally argued that organisations and individuals should be flexible and incorporate lessons learned throughout their lifespans, into what is now a well-established discipline in management and business studies: organisational learning.

Boud is interested in how people learn and the fostering of that learning through mechanisms such as problem-based and negotiated learning incorporating reflection and reciprocal peer learning. He has developed models for learning from experience and the role of those who intervene in learning whether or not they are identified as teachers. Problem-based learning (PBL) is a student-centred instructional strategy in which students collaboratively solve problems and reflect on their experiences. The characteristics of PBL are:

- Learning is driven by challenging, open-ended problems.
- Students work in small collaborative groups.
- Teachers take on the role as 'facilitators' of learning.

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their group and organise and direct the learning process with support from a tutor or instructor.

How professionals learn in workplace settings has been Eraut's focus. He found that most learning occurs informally during normal working processes and that there is considerable scope for recognising and enhancing such learning. As mentioned earlier, the current focus is on developing an 'epistemology of practice where knowledge is created and used rather than codified' (Costley and Gibbs, p. 221, cited in Garnett, Costley and Workman, 2009).

Institutional Work-Based Learning

In higher education, workforce development is often referred to as work-based learning and is increasingly recognised as a field of study. Defining workforce development as work-based learning, Costley (2001) argues that it enables higher education to incorporate, in particular, the learning people do, for, in and through work into the learning provided. She also draws our attention to the longevity of engagement in work-based learning in the sector:

'Some universities have been involved in work based learning for a long time, for example, through placements and sandwich courses. Some universities have structured courses where continuing professional development with the knowledge gained through experience is accepted

implicitly. Others use the processes of accrediting prior and experiential learning (APEL) to formally recognise such knowledge....Learning contracts are becoming familiar instruments. These activities are variously described as work based, work related, placement activities, elective modules, independent study, APEL, reach out, CPD, work based learning among others. It is worth noting that work based learning in higher education is nearly always part of an existing university programme with its own disciplinary frameworks and approaches to higher education. Learning outcomes and criteria for assessment are therefore within the subject knowledge born of research and scholarly activities that already are embedded in the universities.' (Costley, 2001)

What is difficult to conceptualise is the lack of sustained engagement by higher education in workforce development, when there have been long vocational learning traditions in theology, law, construction and medicine. This may be to do with a traditional university interest in entry-level education for the professions, 'liberal' adult education or social function. However, from a contemporary business employer perspective, the Institute of Directors concluded:

'The quality of the UK's education system and the skill deficiencies in our workforce remain disappointing elements on the country's scorecard. Until this sorry state of affairs is tackled, too many individuals will fail to develop their potential, too many businesses will suffer from skill shortages and skill gaps and too many organisations will fail to improve productivity, thereby impeding the country's economic performance.' (Wilson, 2006)

A description of well-meaning misunderstandings and cultural distinctions perhaps pinpoints the underlying causes for a slow and partial response to work-based learning:

'We somehow seem to be incapable of learning from experience. Succeeding generations of employers are still marooned in tedious development project steering committees whose proceedings take place in academic jargon. Frustrated academics are still struggling to secure placements and projects with the very companies who are lambasting the quality of their graduates' work readiness.' (UVAC, 2002)

It could also be concerned with intellectual scepticism amongst the academic community, that employability which is associated with work-based learning is nothing more than a continuous conflict between individuals, market demands and fluctuations: 'Employability not only depends on fulfilling the requirements of a specific job, but also on how one stands relative to others within a hierarchy of job seekers.' (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003) In other words it has little relevance to the understanding of the subject or discipline, a primary function of learning in universities.

There is no doubt that higher education has been highly successful in developing and delivering entry to work programmes for many years; that is, qualifying people for work at higher levels. The sector continues to engage in giving graduates 'the relative chances of acquiring and maintaining different kinds of employment' (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003) which 'involves both the capacity and the willingness to be and to remain attractive for the labour market, by anticipating changes in tasks and work environment and reacting on them'(De Grip, Loo and Sanders, 1999).

However, continuous professional development, retraining, part-time provision, learning diagnostics, assessment and certification, all work based, remain marginal. Why is this the case, when the national economic and social demands are as strident as ever? Part of the story is a general lack, at a local university level, of an overall institutional work-based learning strategy and lack of relative importance attached to this type of activity, including making links with business compared with developing academic research and international standing (Connor, 2005). This could be attributed to public sector funding priorities which, until recently, have not encouraged higher education engagement in workforce development.

In this respect, it is noticeable that national work-based learning government initiatives, such as modern and graduate apprenticeships, have failed to become integral components of further and higher education progression routes (UVAC, 2003a). A lack of employer awareness of higher education, and the perception that higher education is out of touch, impractical, and unresponsive to employer needs, continues to act as a barrier to higher education engagement with employers (Faithorn, 2005).

However considerable effort has been made to develop work-based learning, particularly by institutions such as Middlesex, Anglia Ruskin, Portsmouth, Derby, Glamorgan and Northumbria universities. It has been achieved through the individual and organisational desire to respond to local and regional needs. This is despite the paucity of coincident policy directives from agencies with responsibility for business, skills, education and learning. Whatever the national policy drive, mechanisms to connect business needs with higher education provision are generally disorganised and confusing.

What Does this Mean for the Individual, Employer and University?

There is increasing interest by employees, employers and universities in workplace learning. Those in work are increasingly undertaking work-based learning qualifications because they:

- 'Are able to see direct relevance between studying for a qualification to work-based learning and their role in the workplace.
- Can obtain support from their employers.
- Are able to develop the programme around their own professional development needs and individual interests.
- Are able to negotiate the focus, context, timescale and assessment of their work.
- Can fit this flexible form of study into their working and personal lives.
- View studying for an accredited qualification as evidence of commitment to their professional role.
- Seek career progression and the potential for increased earnings.' (Durrant, Rhodes and Young, 2009, p. 10)

Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2009, p. 11) explain the value of work-based learning and accreditation to the employer as:

- Staff undertake real work projects which offer direct benefit to their organisation.

- The workforce becomes motivated and focused on organisational challenges.
- Staff on the work-based learning programmes become more closely engaged in organisational processes.
- Increased loyalty results from the visible and tangible investment in the development of the workforce.
- Staff retention rates are improved and enhanced capabilities of existing workforce can help with recruitment – both as a means of attracting new employees, but also as a means of promoting from within the organisation.
- Studying on a work-based learning programme to help employees to achieve their full potential.
- They can work with the university to develop a programme which not only supports the professional development of their staff which also focuses on organisational improvement.
- Organisational and cultural change can be effected through small-scale developments via work-based learning projects.
- Work-based learning can be a means of addressing and meeting an organisation's business plans.

It is equally important in this tripartite arrangement to recognise that: universities have a stake in workforce development; the labour market and employer demand hence work-based learning. However, there is no common language between universities and employers; and there are national structural faults in the system. Consequently it is no surprise that work-based learning as 'the new kid on the curriculum and qualification block' in higher education is less well developed than perhaps it should be.