Learning for Real: Work-based Education in Universities

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Personalities which became effective in action were bred and tested in the medium of action.

(Dewey 1900: 4)

Introduction

In several countries including Australia and the UK, work-based learning degrees are being established in which learning occurs primarily in the workplace, with work as the curriculum. These are not extensions of cooperative education and sandwich courses but a radically new approach to what constitutes university study. They provide a new framework for organizing and structuring a university award. In this respect, work-based learning needs to be distinguished from workplace learning, that form of learning that occurs on a day-to-day basis at work as employees acquire new skills or develop new approaches to solving problems. No formal educational recognition normally accrues to such learning, whether or not it is organized systematically. The emergence of work-based learning acknowledges that work, even on a day-to-day basis, is imbued with learning opportunities (Garrick 1998), heretofore not recognized as educationally significant or worthwhile. Work-based learning gives academic recognition to these opportunities, when suitably planned and represented.

In specific terms work-based learning has come to be used as a description of accredited university courses in which a significant proportion of study, if not all, is undertaken in the workplace whose issues and challenges form the principal focus of study. At present, the majority of learners enrolled in work-based learning programmes are engaged in full-time employment. Work-based learning courses, which have been pioneered at such universities as Portsmouth and Middlesex (Boud 1998), are typically not a new mode of study or a substitute for existing part-time courses, but a new approach to higher education which extends its accessibility and flexibility.
It is becoming apparent, though, that there is no one form of work-based learning, that its current incarnations are a reflection of the contemporary moment, and that in different circumstances, work-based learning might have a different character altogether.

In this chapter we examine work-based learning in both old and new universities in the United Kingdom, where work-based learning has been somewhat more elaborated as a practice than, say, in Australia where work-based learning is still in its infancy. This is in part because the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in the UK has been more active than some other countries' governments in promoting the vocationalization of its system of education. Its recent enthusiasm for the University for Industry – potentially another version of work-based learning – is typical of its support for extending the ambit of higher education into the workplace. Work-based learning is beginning to be implemented in some Australian universities, most notably at the University of Technology, Sydney, where the authors of this chapter are located.

It is of note that there are similar developments to work-based learning in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector in Australia (see ANTA 1999). It seems probable that over time there will be a loosening of the boundaries between higher education and other sectors of post-compulsory education, as well as the boundaries between undergraduate and postgraduate education.

In this chapter though, the main focus is university education, and the challenges that the introduction of work-based learning alongside more orthodox forms of study pose to the academic and administrative environment of the university. We describe the way in which work-based learning has been accommodated into the higher education system and argue that this accommodation has not always been a comfortable one. In many respects its accommodation has been facilitated by the changing context of higher education and policies that have fostered more ‘realistic’ forms of university curricula designed to meet the needs of the changing workforce. 'Learning for real' is a now a powerful force in the formation of the university as has been the force of access. Their combined impact is producing a style of higher education in which the fulfilment of career aspiration has become an important goal. This will come about as the essentially arbitrary structural arrangements of institutions are challenged over the need for more seamless educational opportunities by learners applying the principle of consumer demand.

Work-based learning: a new pedagogy for new times

Work-based learning is, in many respects, an idea whose time has come. As a new mode of education it epitomizes much of the dramatic change which has been occurring in and around higher education. For example,
work-based learning has come to prominence during a period when universities have been undergoing a process of 'realization'; that is, they have been encouraged to develop closer alliances with business and commerce, industry and the public sector. This has been part of a broader policy agenda centring on economic reform that has focused on, among other matters, the need, if they are to take advantage of the emergent knowledge economy, for nation-states to intellectualize their labour forces. Higher education, because it is a central player in human capital formation, has been regarded as a vital part of this reform. Thus a cult of relevance has begun to sweep through the sometimes arcane tendencies of the academy, which has resulted in universities updating their epistemological profiles and organizational structures in line with what they perceive to be the world's best practice. This has not been easy. For example, some of the elite institutions (not all by any means) and some faculties are staggeringly untouched by these developments and have resisted these modernizing trends. They are badly infected with legacy inertia, which makes it difficult for them to liberate themselves from the stranglehold of their traditions.

Thus the advocacy of work-based learning has tended to be strongest in universities which have always had more pragmatic outlooks. It is no accident, for example, that it has been strongest in those institutions which were formerly polytechnics, or institutes of technology as they were called in Australia, and which always championed closer relationships with industry and commerce than the universities. Part of the charter of such institutions, as Symes argues in his chapter, involved establishing such links, and foregoing some academic aspirations in favour of more applied approaches to learning. However, work-based learning is not confined to such institutions as can be testified by pioneering work at the universities of Leeds and Cambridge (see Boud and Solomon, forthcoming).

But recent support for work-based learning is also symptomatic of a more generalized shift towards what has been called 'instrumental progressivism' across the whole spectrum of education which is marked by a number of features. These include an emphasis on accessibility, transferable skills, competency formation, modularized educational programmes, student profiling and the development of reflective practitioners (Robins and Webster 1999). In direct contrast to the approaches to learning which emphasized inflexibility and the attenuation of capacity, and which were commensurate with Taylorist patterns of work, the new emphasis is on the cultivation of the flexible individual, possessing a range of symbolic and numerical capacities.

The trend towards 'instrumental progressivism' is driven by radical changes to the nature of work. The move from mass production to flexible specialization has created a labour force in which the major input is intellectual rather than muscular. Whole categories of employment have been created in the last two decades or so, which did not exist before the era of information technology; at the same time, many areas of work have declined or, in some instances, become extinct. There have also been dramatic changes to
the demographics of work – more women in the labour force, for example – and to the temporalization of work. Individuals work longer and harder, but also in jobs that are of shorter duration and have a project focus (Sennett 1999). It is now a case of several careers in a lifetime, not one, for which individuals can expect to have to upgrade and extend their credentials, often through self-financed education.

These changes have placed new demands on the nature of university study. Universities were always to a degree vocational institutions, particularly in terms of the high-status professions such as law and medicine, but in the last few years this vocationalism has become more pronounced, reflecting the growth in knowledge-based employment, particularly in the service and financial sectors. But these developments have also brought into question the efficacy and appropriateness of front-end education and training, comprising a degree followed by work.

The rise of work-based education emerges from the phalanx of forces now driving higher education. The reforms of the 1980s in UK and Australia acquiesced to these, leading to a questioning of the very nature of the university as ‘academic’. The term has come to have pejorative overtones denoting something that is not applicable to the real world. Indeed, in recognition of the fact that during the 1960s and 1970s universities had become too ivory-towerish, most have begun to promote themselves as belonging to the real world, dealing with issues that really matter and that are useful (Symes 1998). Although much of the language is rhetorical and relates to the way institutions are positioning themselves in the new context, and has actual substance in the ‘real’ world (see Robin Usher in this volume), there are telling points in the rhetoric. Universities are keen to underline the point that their degrees are useful and will enhance employment opportunities. The fact that work-based learning has caused no obvious consternation, as it might have done in the ivory-tower university, is a mark of the shift to a more ‘realized’ university.

But the impetus for work-based education is not just instrumental. The clarion calls of access and equity are ones to which higher education has also had to respond not only on social justice grounds. Much of the access and equity rationale has a human capital underlay, that of better utilizing the talent pool of the population and making available the highest forms of education to the disadvantaged (Taylor and Henry 1994). This has led to the transformation of higher education from an elite to a mass system. At a time when universities have been encouraged to extend their access to sections of the community that were under-represented in their populations, it has made sense to diversify the ways of undertaking university study. The virtualization of the university is one current version of this diversification. Yet it is one which has its limitations and also dangers. Although on-line courses might facilitate teaching much of the content in a degree course, it is difficult to see how more personal and social skills can be acquired online. Also, most high school leavers want to experience the university in some real way, if nothing else for its social life.
Work-based learning diversifies the study repertoire of the university in such a way, as Beckett argues in this volume, to affirm the real. More to the point, it also facilitates access in a different sense from the policies of inclusion that have seen minority groups admitted to the university. Access in this case refers to those at work, who are not disadvantaged in any orthodox sense but might be disadvantaged in terms of access to higher education by being at work. This might mean that they are not available for existing forms of study or, perhaps, are unable to meet the disciplinary demands of the university’s knowledge structures. Work-based learning aims to mitigate both types of disadvantage. First, it recognizes that workplace experiences are potentially ‘knowledgeable’ ones, which contain countless opportunities for learning and development, the acquisition of expertise and so on. There is no reason to suppose that classrooms and lecture theatres are the only venues in which pedagogical experiences may be located. This means that individuals who are at work and who would not ordinarily have considered going to university are able to do so and, moreover, able to incorporate some aspects of their work experience as part of their study for a degree. Second, this makes it easier for those who have been out of the schooling system (often because they were excluded from it) for some time to re-embark on study through the ‘academization’ of what they know and learn at work.

The intensification of work makes time an increasingly precious commodity, but it also makes its ‘academization’ one of the more seductive features of work-based learning. Accrediting work as a legitimate area of learning means reduction of time on-campus; that already ‘overtimed’ students do not have to leave their workplace or their home for study. That many work-based students are on-line as part of their normal work means that they can also take advantage of the virtual learning opportunities through university study, including open learning. In many ways work-based learning is adult education in a new guise, one that uses work as an alternative point of entry into the higher education system. As such, it presents an extremely grounded version of the postmodern challenge to higher education, which is leading to a more student- and less discipline-centred university. Indeed, this shift from the product to the consumer of educational services is symptomatic of the specialization of services in postmodern culture, which are increasingly mapped around the particular needs of the individual and designed accordingly. The diversification of university study has normalized the notion that there should be different modes and ways of obtaining a degree. The context of flexibility is a mark of the more student-centred university. This has meant attending to the needs of the consumers of education (who after all are paying for much of their higher education) in a more direct way.

The discourse of free choice that undergirds the marketization of higher education has also caused universities to use the market as the place to test the viability of their courses. This has also meant attempting to determine the logic of the consumer of education services, which is one reason (apart from the obvious pedagogic ones) why there has been an upsurge in interest in
work-based learning. A degree gained in the workplace and for the workplace makes sense for the employee and the employer alike, who are also consumers, albeit in a more indirect way, of educational services. On both grounds, then, work-based learning satisfies the logic of consumption and production: it purports to produce a more productive worker and a more satisfied educational consumer.

In summary, work-based education is demand-driven, arising from a number of significant imperatives. These include:

- students who want recognition for what they have already learnt, would like to develop their emergent interests through study, and require more flexible modes of study to do so, including the opportunity to make work the major focus of their study;
- employers who want to harness more effectively what they see to be the considerable under-utilized potential of universities and to emphasize learning as part of new forms of productivity;
- governments which want to increase the measure of satisfaction among students and employers regarding the outcomes of higher education, and to shift costs away from the public purse;
- universities which want to be less dependent on the purse strings of government, to provide more relevant courses of learning for their students and to engage in partnerships with new sites of knowledge production.

The problems of implementing work-based learning

Although there is much that makes pedagogic sense in work-based learning, its implementation in universities has been fraught with academic and administrative difficulties. While universities have had their structures corporatized in the last decade or so, their administrative mechanisms are still highly bureaucratic and are not conducive to pedagogic approaches such as work-based learning which challenge established procedures in a variety of ways. Universities are, for example, extremely territorial in terms of their faculty operations and epistemological advantages. This means that they are often less favourably disposed to strategies of learning which challenge traditional areas of understanding and knowledge.

For example, at a quite mundane level, work-based learning often runs into problems with the university calendar which, unlike that of work, is fragmented into semesters and contains extended periods of time when, on the surface at least, no academic action takes place. Work-based learning is often incompatible with the time units of the university, and the way these are allocated. Of more significance is the fact that work-based problems and projects do not correspond to the disciplinary structures of the university or even the structures of practice associated with professional courses of learning. Learning at work is not necessarily labelled history or
physics but can involve a variety of disciplinary or, even, no disciplinary experiences at all. The boundaries of knowledge involved, where they exist, are far more amorphous than those associated with the traditional university, which are often inflexible and not easily abandoned. When learning challenges are created from the exigencies of work there is often no pre-existing map that represents the territory of knowledge being explored.

Other problems are posed by learners who do not want to study what they have already learned. Therefore genuine recognition of prior learning is needed: not just a process of jumping through the criteria referencing of acquired competencies to demonstrate equivalence with particular university courses, but providing real credit for learning gained at work. This may not relate to an existing university course but it must relate to a programme of work-based learning. As we have already argued, work is a potentially rich environment of learning. But what in the world of work can really be equivalent to Psychology 1?

Work-based learners may not be very interested in ceasing their employment and studying full-time. This is understandable given that jobs may be few and far between; but they are also not even interested in weekly attendance at lectures in the part-time mode, which is increasingly impractical given the time-intensification of contemporary work.

Moreover, many work-based learners are not thrilled to study content packaged in a way to suit disciplinary or professional knowledge interests. Work-based learning challenges the existing categories of knowledge that underlie the organization of content. These are inappropriate to the needs of the workplace. Thus universities need to offer courses that are not attendance-dependent, that measure course participation in some other way. Indeed, the whole notion of a course of study linked to semesters and prerequisites is anachronistic, and out of step with the temporal revolution that has occurred in the post-Fordist workplace (Symes 1999). It is ironic that the regime of diversity and access has done little to change the basic parameters of university education, which are much the same, notwithstanding the addition of summer and winter schools, as they were two decades ago.

This also extends to assessment. Work-based learners typically want to be assessed in ways and on matters that are related to their work needs and interests; they want to demonstrate their competencies and have them recognized and legitimated in an academic form. Therefore new forms of assessment need to be devised that are tailored to these new work-related modes of learning but yet at the same time preserve the integrity of the university qualification.

There is thus much involved in work-based learning that challenges the whole framework of university learning. That these issues are not widely canvassed in relation to such learning is, perhaps, a reflection of the fact that the numbers of students involved are relatively small. Yet the questions that work-based learning poses could easily be transposed to the university as whole, which needs a thorough educational reappraisal, particularly as it faces competition from the virtual or corporate university and other
providers of quality education. For example, we need to be able to determine what is essential about university education and what cannot be replicated elsewhere without compromise or degradation. Is it, as Barnett (1997) has recently suggested, the critical life? Unless universities can identify the characteristic features of their education that are not readily replicable by other institutions then there is no reason why they should continue to enjoy their autonomy or their control over the provision of higher learning.

These are not matters for armchair speculation. Already one Australian university has been approached by one of the largest engineering management organizations in the world and by one of Australia's largest multinational financial institutions to provide courses of learning for their organizations. The university could not accommodate the first and so the corporation has approached one of the oldest and most traditional universities that could do so. Plainly, such overtures are becoming more common and in the climate of fiscal restraint, universities cannot afford to reject them. Indeed, the trend towards work-based education is beginning to develop a momentum of its own and what appears to be a small experiment at the moment could very quickly grow into something much larger. The challenge then for work-based educators in the university is to develop a framework which neither compromises academic standards nor preserves them in such an inflexible way as to make the potential of work-based learning hard to realize.

Work-based learning in the best possible of worlds

As has been discussed, work-based learning is a radical approach to university education in which students undertake study for a degree or diploma through activities conducted primarily in their workplace and in topic areas which may have no immediate equivalence to university subjects. The learning opportunities found in work-based learning programmes are not contrived for study purposes, but arise from the normal work situation. The role of the university is to equip 'unqualified' individuals already in employment to develop lifelong learning skills, not through engagement with existing disciplines or programmes of study defined by university teachers, but through a curriculum which is customized for each individual and each context. This borrows its pedagogic form from the independent studies programmes that were prevalent in the 1970s at several UK polytechnics (Percy and Ramsden 1980; Stephenson 1988). What is significant, though, in these approaches to work-based learning is that work is not a discrete and limited element of study, as is familiar in sandwich courses and internships - the immediate ancestors of work-based learning. Neither are issues arising from problems encountered in work used merely as subjects of assignments as is common in many other forms of flexible provision which use learning contracts. In work-based learning degrees, work is quite literally the foundation of the curriculum (Boud 1998); the activity from which learning arises and by which learning is defined.
Work-based degrees have been embraced by employers across industry and business, the public and community sectors. The appreciation of their value, generally attributed to the fact that such learning advances the cause of their enterprises, is expressed to the extent of granting financial support to work-based students and entering into formal partnerships with universities. Nonetheless, the university continues to enforce its controls over work-based programmes through determining what is ultimately acceptable in the way of a work-based award. But this does not mean that the content of courses is ever fixed and absolute. Each work-based programme is designed to suit a particular work situation. Students are expected to take a more active role in negotiating their learning than is the case in conventional courses. This negotiation usually involves three parties: student, academic adviser and workplace supervisor, the last of whom provides specific guidance on learning how to learn and work-based learning skills. Through such negotiations entry requirements into courses can be adjusted according to the prior qualifications and current competencies of the students. Learning outcomes are performance-related, not time-related, which means students can exit courses whenever they have reached or demonstrated an appropriate level of learning.

In order to do this, it is necessary to have an explicit framework for assessment and the determination of what constitutes a given level of achievement, including generic learning outcomes. Thus in many respects work-based learning is not less regulated than a conventional university course; if anything, because it involves more variables and unexpected contingencies, it is subject to more regulation, more accountability and scrutiny (see Usher and Solomon 1999). Typically, in a work-based learning course there is an amalgam of the following educational elements:

- units from existing university courses and those specially designed for the programme;
- recognition of current competencies to establish how much needs to be studied for a particular course;
- accredited subjects offered by the employing or any other organization;
- work-based learning studies;
- a learning agreement or contract which specifies the above and ensures that the various partners involved adhere to it.

Throwing down the gauntlet to the mainstream university

Work-based learning, by its very nature, throws down the gauntlet to the mainstream university, many of whose pedagogic practices such as the lecture were originally developed during the Middle Ages. These practices served a culture in which books were few and far between, and have hardly altered much in spite of the fact that books are no longer a rare commodity. We have already mentioned that universities have undergone massification, and
are no longer the elite institutions they were in quite the same sense of
catering to the intellectual 'aristocracy' of the nation. This said, work-based
learning is still undergoing evolution. Indeed, in many respects, work-based
learning is still an idea in search of a practice, a pedagogy that is undergoin
development as it accommodates itself to the exigencies of the workplace
and the university. We want to discuss some of the ways in which this is
occurring and how work-based learning is mounting a challenge to exist-
ing conceptions of university education. In doing so, we will focus on a
limited number of examples which exemplify work-based learning at its most
advanced. We will ignore those approaches which are essentially flexible
versions of existing courses with a small component of workplace learning.
Instead we will focus on some of the challenges to conventional university
education which are posed by those forms of work-based learning in which
the majority of study takes place at work and does not involve existing
course units.

One of the more important of these challenges is that of acceptance,
of establishing the credentials of work-based learning and gaining its
legitimacy in the university setting. Unless a work-based award is in some
sense equivalent to other qualifications and accepted as such, the reason for
having the university involved lessens, and other institutions will burgeon to
take its place without, perhaps, its ethical and critical concerns. This, then,
raises the question, what is required for any programme of work-based study
to meet the requirements of a university degree? Ultimately, this matter is
linked to the question of assessment. Obviously, in a programme which is
solidly based in work, assessment needs to be related to practice. Compet-
ence frameworks, though far from infallible, are well developed in terms of
assessing capacity in professional domains (Goncz 1994), and many univer-
sities experimenting with work-based learning have turned to them.

A more holistic approach to assessment is that developed by Richard
Winter at the Anglia Polytechnic University in Cambridge. Originally estab-
lished for work-based learning in social work, the generic features of this
approach enabled it to be translated with relative ease into an automotive
engineering course used with the Ford Motor Company. The approach
adopted a set of seven Core Assessment Criteria that are in effect dimen-
sions of a model of professionalism. The criteria involved included effect-
ive grasp of professional knowledge, intellectual rigour and flexibility and
continuous professional learning. These were then matched against field-
specific Elements of Competence for each course module whose achieve-
ment had to be demonstrated (Winter and Maisch 1996).

Work-based learning and the new knowledge production

One of the ongoing problems relating to work-based learning concerns the
matter of proprietorship and ownership. In the traditional university courses
were owned by the academy, which defined the parameters of assessment, determined who taught the course, and in what manner and with what types of course materials. In work-based learning these issues are more amorphous, and therefore more subject to contestation and debate.

In fact, many of these concerns are not peculiar to work-based learning courses. Earlier it was argued that the emergence of such learning epitomized many of the issues and problems experienced by the university at all levels of its operation. The mechanisms of knowledge production, which are undergoing radical change, are just another of them. Knowledge production, for example, is obviously no longer monopolized by the university but is being produced in other sites such as corporations and by industry in general. In the context of product and service development characteristic of the post-Fordist economy, knowledge and information have become increasingly valued commodities. They have become valued assets in most workplaces, not just academic ones. Recognition of the changing nature of knowledge production has been the subject of much recent commentary (e.g. Gibbons et al. 1994), and is discussed more fully by other contributors to this volume.

Gibbons and his ‘globalized’ team of academics have argued that knowledge practices are increasingly transdisciplinary ones, which have broken out of the boundaries of the academy and are employed across a variety of social and economic contexts. For example, much of this new knowledge production occurs in think tanks such as the Friends of the Earth or the Evatt Foundation. They argue too that the scientific frameworks of knowledge, which gave rise to the disciplinary categories of the modern university, are also fast being abandoned. They are being replaced by more permeable boundaries of knowledge production, in which teams of experts representing a variety of disciplinary backgrounds pool their wisdom and insights. This is because many of the problems that society now confronts are complex, and involve empirical as well as ethical issues. Gene technology is a case in point and is typical of the new epistemological conditions, which make demands on molecular biologists and ethicists who must balance the pursuit of biological understanding against the possible abuse of such understanding. Hence, Gibbons et al. (1994) differentiate two modes of knowledge production. The first they call Mode 1, which they typify as disciplinary knowledge and which is culturally concentrated and institutionalized within universities. The second they call Mode 2, which is knowledge that is useful to governments, industry and society. They see it as involving fields of understanding rather than disciplines. It is typically communicated through professional networks rather than academic journals and monographs. This means that it is more accessible and socially distributed than Mode 1 knowledge.

In terms of this differentiation, work-based learning exemplifies Mode 2 type knowledge. It acknowledges that the workplace is a site of knowledge production – knowledge that is difficult to compartmentalize in terms of the traditional epistemological frameworks associated with university study. This is one of the reasons that it poses so many difficulties for the university
which remains, for the most part, a Mode 1 construct, still organized along disciplinary lines and following the paradigm of research production displaying Newtonian features. Moreover, academics for the most part—although this is beginning to change—are socialized into Mode 1 forms of knowledge production, and much of their academic identity is tethered to maintaining the values and protocols of such production. Hence, many academics remain rightfully perturbed about the directions of the academy as it embarks on mercantile ventures, sometimes at the expense of academic freedom (Buchbinder 1993).

Academic identity is particularly threatened by work-based learning, when academic knowledge has to be tested in the workplace and where it can be made to look vulnerable and non-viable. In such a scenario, academics find their academic and professional identities challenged. Their perceived capacity to be useful is reduced when supervising a work-based student who is often more in command of the knowledge environment of work than an academic can ever hope to be. The new work situation, which has been reconfigured in ways which the academy has yet to come to terms with, is much less subject to control than the professional or disciplinary context. Work-based learning challenges the traditional codifications of knowledge: for working knowledge is often unbounded, unruly, and much less subject to disciplinary control (an issue explored by Solomon and McIntyre in Chapter 8). This means that those who advise work-based learning studies have to have more affinity with the ‘practising epistemologists’, that emergent category of academics who are more ‘in-the-world and of-the-world’ than the Mode 1 academics who have tended to pride themselves on ‘being out-of-the-world’ (Barnett 1997: 148).

The challenge to identity is not just that of the teacher. Learning in a work context takes the learning interactions from the private to the semi-public domain. No longer is it something that is apart from normal work interactions, but it is a potentially significant part of them. Therein lies the potential for examining and questioning relationships and assumptions about work. There is also the question of who are one’s peers. There is probably a need to establish peer learners in a work context as a necessary part of work-based learning rather than assume that learning at work can just be an add-on and not be disruptive.

The challenge to academic identity can easily become a challenge to academic professionalism. Some of the people with whom we have spoken have been far more relaxed than we would be about the supervision of learning projects being undertaken by staff not employed as academic staff and in some cases not qualified to do so. We do not mean here industrial staff with technical expertise—these certainly have a role—but non-professional and often part-time employees of universities. If we are demanding greater professionalism of academics in teaching and learning for conventional courses—which is certainly required—we should demand at least as much from those who have not even been socialized into their role of fostering learning.
If work becomes the curriculum, how do we think about it and negotiate our way through it? What must necessarily be included, what is of lesser significance? Does it involve workplace research or workplace learning? How do we ensure that students are equipped as broad, lifelong learners when the curriculum is potentially narrow? In sorting through these dilemmas the academy needs to maintain control over the educational qualities of work-based learning otherwise it risks becoming a debasement of the educational process, conducted on the job with only a minimal contribution from the university.

Although work-based learning offers opportunities for those who, for various reasons, might not otherwise be able to take advantage of tertiary study, and thus assists to improve the inclusiveness of the university, there is a need to be cautious about some aspects of its provision. One area of caution relates to the knowledge frameworks within which work-based learning are located. Without careful consideration this can tend towards a narrowness of specialization that flies in the face of the traditional function of the university, which is to expose individuals to an environment in which many disciplinary ‘conversations’ are taking place (see Oakeshott 1967). Universities are sites where a number of communities of inquiry exist alongside one another. Work-based learning can be remote from these communities and through its focus on individualized and localized inquiry can create the impression that knowledge is a thoroughly individualistic creation with only local and very specific features. Yet more than ever enquiry, as was argued earlier, is transdisciplinary and involves conversations between different specialists and communities. Universities have always been places where the aspiration was that knowledge experiences were generalizable rather than specific, which is where most of their value has been derived; that the skills acquired in doing philosophy and history, for example, can be transferred to other domains. Although the issue of transferability is a hotly debated one, there are still good reasons for ensuring that students encounter a variety of ways of understanding which can help them interrogate their work experience. For example, work-based learning may include, if appropriate, general studies of the contemporary workplace as an increasingly complex organizational unit, involving organizational theory, equity and access policies, ethical decision making, health and safety issues. Alternatively, work-based learning studies may necessarily need to encompass studies of multiple sites of activity using different perspectives if the traps of the individual and the local are to be avoided.

There is much more to work than simply being productive, and work-based learning, if it is to be authentic and useful in the fullest sense, must encompass these areas. One of the major pitfalls for work-based learning is that it could degenerate into short-term training or the fixing of immediate problems. This means that the skills that are acquired in a work-based degree are so narrow that once the job associated with them disappears—and we live in fast-changing working environment—the student will have to embark on another work-based degree, and so on, ad nauseam.
Another is that employers, the partners in work-based learning, start to stake a more manifest interest in the learning of the university in such a way that its benefits are directed entirely at the workplace. Work-based learning thereby becomes a way of underwriting the efficiency and productivity of the workplace, which reduces the cogency of courses of learning that do not obviously do this or that, worse still, begin to raise difficult questions about the practices inherent in a workplace. Here, then, matters of academic freedom are being compromised, and the whole condition of epistemological conduct, which requires openness and untrammelled access to sensitive issues, is being threatened. This is because the value systems of the academy and workplaces are not always in accord. Here again the university needs to operate with responsibility to ensure that work-based learning takes place in workplaces that are suitable for learning and contain appropriate ethical measures designed to protect the worker/student from exploitation. Universities need to vet partnerships carefully to ensure that minimum standards can be met in fostering learning in the workplace and to ensure that partners are aware of the potential challenges of work-based learning studies in the organization.

The way forward

In this chapter we have argued that work-based learning poses challenges for contemporary universities – challenges which they have no option but to embrace if they are not to decline in influence. Work-based learning is perhaps a greater test than that of reduced funding because it touches the very heart of what a university represents.

Innovation in work-based learning involves balancing the often conflicting forces involved in its realization. So far educational strategies have been assembled from well-tried approaches in the adult learning area (recognition of prior learning, negotiated learning contracts, action learning sets and so on), and have built on the practices in independent studies. But the major challenge involves appreciating the constraints and limitations of these approaches and making them work in a context where there is considerably less direct influence over learning than exists in a conventional university course. It is likely that new pedagogic innovations will also be required to deal with the epistemological conundrums of Mode 2 knowledge and new ways of thinking about ‘criticality’ developed in the context of work.

Work-based learning puts an important new focus on learning as distinct from teaching: it is called work-based learning not teaching. Ultimately, all that counts is the learning outcome. How this is achieved is not important, and protecting cherished disciplinary territory is in these circumstances now less meaningful. This offers the potential for new links between teaching and research through the common ground of learning. Courses are becoming more like investigations and the activities in which staff engage
are more like research supervision. This is indeed one of the headaches for cost-conscious university administrators: work-based learning is expensive in terms of the cost of its supervisory arrangements. Unless care is taken in rethinking the role of the academic adviser, making good use of workplace supervision and peer learning, the costs can rival those of supervising research students. Work-based learning is certainly not, as many administrators and employers often see it, a way of realizing human capital on the cheap!

An obvious trap is applying existing pedagogies to the supervision of work-based learning. It is possible that some of the ways of approaching research students might be translated unthinkingly to work-based students, pushing work-based learning in the direction of work-based research. In itself this is no bad thing and research courses of this kind are valid in their own terms. However, the full range and potential of work-based learning may be lost if the research model becomes too dominant.

While some of the dilemmas and challenges are apparent, it is not clear what the political and social circumstances will be in which we respond to them. Will the momentum towards work-based learning be so great that there will be an unholy rush to offer such programmes? As with on-line learning (the current ‘ unholy rush’), this could result in programmes which are poorly conceptualized and formulated by staff who have not faced the educational challenges which are presented. The alternative is to be more cautious in the development of work-based programmes and to take time and effort to produce frameworks and processes of learning that have real cogency and potency and lead to good-quality programmes of which we can be proud. Anything less and we risk abandoning the visionary aspects of work-based learning to the academic opportunists.

References


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