213 Beyond employability? A new conceptual framing for 'real world learning' to better situate institutional endeavours in this space

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

'Real world learning' is an overtly stated aspiration of many universities, though readers are often left to interpret its meaning. Most frequently, the term is seen used as synonymous with experiential, authentic and applied learning, directly linked to skills and knowledge for employability and students' careers. There are also examples of more 'radical' real world learning approaches, that encompass areas including civic engagement, sustainability, and citizenship.

Responding to calls for greater rigour in this area, this paper uses a modified Clark triangle conceptual framework to situate real world learning within a spectrum, where endpoints are 'instrumentalist', with strong market/state pulls and 'social constructivist', with broader societal pulls. This provides a theoretical space within which to place the myriad definitions observed, also bringing clarity to their ideological underpinnings. The work offers an important foundation on which further research might build, and a way to differentiate curricula and appropriate enabling pedagogies.

Full paper

Introduction

'Real world learning' (RWL) is observed in higher education (HE) marketing, policy, and practice discourses as a phrase not dissimilar to those identified by Morrish and Sauntson (2020), 'strategically deployable shifters' (Urcioli, 2000, p.4), where interpretation 'depends on the relation of its user to its audience and so shifts with context'.

Barnett and Coate (2005, p.92) have noted a steady shift towards real-world and performative curricula, and across the research literature, RWL is seen coupled, or synonymous with experiential, authentic and applied learning, addressing a theory-practice gap. It is often directly linked to skills and knowledge for employability and students' careers, where work-based, or work-integrated learning and placements are seen as pinnacle activities. That these approaches are termed 'real', 'progressive' and 'relevant' makes problematic inferences regarding learning and curricula 'excluded from imposed notions of real' (Trelfa, 2021, p.300). This is a potential use value judgement that infers development of a 'worker-self-as-skills-bundle' (Urcioli, 2008, p.211). In some instances, the term is seen to offer a more radical stance, encompassing areas like civic and community engagement, sustainability and citizenship education and, as at my own institution, diversity and inclusion and Indigenous perspectives. Digital and interdisciplinary (boundary-crossing) knowledge and skills, and reflective practice are also noted as key across RWL. Introducing the spectrum of underpinning learning and education theories, Trelfa (2021) spans this 'multiformed landscape' to define RWL as 'critical consciousness of, as well as beyond, self through experiential learning' (p.303-304).

Morley and Jamils' (2021) volume of case studies makes the call for RWL to move 'into a robust, research informed position so its implementation does not occur by accident' (p.5). For staff, implementing RWL aspirations may be hampered by a lack of clarity, and complex questions arise for learning, teaching and research deemed not to be real world. For those external to the university, informed understandings and choice are made more difficult. With growing efforts to decolonise HE curricula and pedagogies, and recognition of the multiplicity of knowledge systems beyond 'western/northern', questions such as 'which world?' 'whose reality?' and importantly 'to what end?' must be asked. It is important to therefore examine the ideologies behind these interpretations which are likely connected to views on the purpose(s) of HE. A gradual shift of HE from public to private good is widely recognised, and with this also a shift

in curricula, pedagogies and students' relationships with the academy (Englund and Bergh, 2020, p.41). The reality is however unlikely to lie at the somewhat unhelpful spectrum endpoints (Muller and Young, 2014).

The conceptual framework

The amended Clark (1983) triangle of coordination of tensions in the HE system developed by Meth (2022) offers a spectrum for applied curricula and pedagogies (and RWL approaches) (Figure 1) that sit anywhere between instrumentalist (state/market-driven) and social constructivist (societal) endpoints. This spectrum was developed following Wheelahan (2009) who noted the lack of clarity in defining experiential, contextual learning, where both constructivism and instrumentalism hold commitments towards these (p.227).
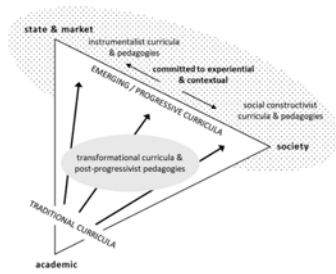

Figure 1. Amended Clark triangle of coordination linking pedagogic and curricular models to underlying ideologies, positioning real world learning (stippled area) (adapted from Meth, 2022).

Spectrum ends relate to differing ideologies on the purpose of HE, reflecting more appropriately the full spectrum of RWL cases, seen, for example in Morley and Jamil (2021), albeit with a skew towards state/market aims.

Discussion

In the instance of Australian HE (where my institution is based), Khalaf (2020) notes the singularity of purpose conveyed through policy and communication documents, where HE is positioned as an 'export service industry'. This chimes with the dominant narratives of RWL tending towards 'state/economic'. Khalaf (2020) recognises the inadequacy of the original Clark triangle (p.451) in representing current tensions in HE, stressing the importance of continued dialogue on the aims of Australian HE, asking where the voices 'advocating for HE's role in creating a better world' might be (p.450).

This new spectrum, with an overt distinction of different 'worlds' and aims embodied in RWL offers a conceptual space within which to support such a dialogue, and opportunities to explicitly acknowledge critical radical pedagogies, with social justice and democratic knowledge groundings. The study provides an effective foundation on which to build further research. A scoping study (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) exploring the full range of definitions of RWL across the literature and in institutional discourses is proposed as a possible next step. This would capture the breadth of interpretations with the potential to bring greater clarity to the range of approaches and corresponding enabling pedagogies.

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