

Work based learning; the therapy of the workplace (0015)

Gibbs Paul ¹, Annette Fillery-Travis², Kate Maguire², ¹*Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University, Nicosia, Cyprus*, ²*Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University, London, United Kingdom*

The notion of education as therapy was substantially developed in the book *The Therapy of Education* (2007). Its premise is that where education is perceived as a process of self-edification rather than one of instrument skills acquisition, the similarity with psychotherapy becomes all too evident. Yet, the notion of an intervention to take a stance on the being one is and wants to be is apparent in the world of experience not least the work world. This intriguing notion is developed by Smith and we attempt to offer a new way of looking at the development of informal learning and workgroup assimilation through this lens. Using the ideas developed by Smith et al (2007) and others we attempt to consider work based learning as personal therapy in the integration of a work group with its own practices and activities.

In making this link we develop a dialogical method which includes the role of mentor, worker and institution. Building on Rorty's (1999, 2007 and 2009) notion of edifying education as revealed by Smith et al (2007) in the platonic discourses featuring Socrates. We propose here that learning to become a member of any community, that is, recognising the other and accepting the otherness of self within a specific situation, requires learning; learning that at times confronts, enlightens, perturbs, disrupts, pleases, delights and changes the becoming of what one might seek to be or the revealing of what has been repressed or hidden.

This becoming is in flux as the nature of what is called work and the workplace in which it occurs, changes. The notion of a consistent relationship with an outside world is ill grounded, exploitative and disenfranchising and needs an exploration of what the nature of work is as well as the development of a greater understanding of the worker relationship with the nature of labour, technology and boredom. This raises real issues for the development of self-esteem, confidence and community engagement. In the contemporary consumer society, where the culture of therapy is prevalent in all walks of life, it is yet to be fully understood as something that can occur between the co-worker and manager in the way that it is becoming better understood between the teacher and the pupil/student. We consider what comprises the potential for appropriate aspects of therapy in the workplace by focussing on the employers and employees as learners in the workplace. But to what extent should this relationship be developed, and what are its concomitant responsibilities?

These are questions this paper attempts to address by exploring it through the lens of work based learning.

Such an approach models generally individualistic theories of learning (exceptions being Billett, 2009) in a way which does not undermine community and solidarity nor diminish the possibilities of political engagement within the existing practices of a workplace which, albeit in constant flux, retain a form and structure which distinguishes the workplace from any other worlds of activity. In this respect the task ought to be to develop capabilities, skills and actions which enable an employee to retain a position within the institution (collective identity) whilst achieving individual goals (individual identities ie professional, social and personal) which we would argue are shaped significantly by the work world of the individual. This is not to diminish the other worlds of which the employee is part but rather focuses on how learning as therapy assists personal affects and traits to come to dwell successfully in a workplace and out of it. We see work based learning practices such as the integration of a work group with its own practices and activities as therapy which nurtures the development of the 'observing self' which begins to oversee the negotiation between different 'identities' within self and in others with different appetites and demands. The observing self becomes the negotiator between identities. In this approach the role of the mentor is central.

The analogy of therapy as work based learning has resonance with many of the contemporary theories of work based learning and explains how training in skills are more important for the industrial in building capabilities than for the specific competencies required to functionally achieve a job. Moreover, the analogy extends to a variety of roles and identities which range from those responsible for formal skills development, those responsible for inducting and guiding the employee in a process of organisational identity formation in a community of practice to those who supervise the whole process through formal gate keeping on resources and policies and those who are managers and human resource specialists.

References

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