

Describing the work for Work-based learning

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Davies Richard¹, ¹*De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom*

Recent years have seen a diversification of vocational higher education. In particular, HEIs have taken up the challenge of responding to the Leitch report (HM Treasury, 2006) and the need to 'upskill the British workforce'. Many emerging programmes of study have employed a substantial component of 'work-based learning'. In this paper I want to interrogate the concept of work-based *learning*.

It is worth noting that I am not concerned here with the application of knowledge, or the role of particular (work) context in helping students to understand the knowledge gleaned in the classroom, though both of these are significant in higher education practice. The concern here is with learning and I want to make a sharp distinction between learning and application (though one might reasonably talk of learning how to apply). The focus of the paper is: what ought to be learnt from the work context, and what can be learnt, focused on learners who are competent and comfortable workers in that particular work context.

These programmes are premised on a number of assumptions on the relationship between the development of an individual worker and the development of the UK economy generally. The nature of these assumptions are not univocal, but seem to require that the education received will achieve at least one of three outcomes:

- i. improve the effectiveness and/or efficiency of the worker in their particular role,
- ii. enable the worker and colleagues to shift towards the development and delivery of a new more valuable product, or
- iii. enable the worker and colleagues to navigate their broader work environment to gain increased value from what they do.

It is not obvious that each of these requires similar educational practices or, in fact, similar conceptualisation of the workplace. However, whatever the aspiration, one needs to be able to describe the work context and how one might improve the agency of individual agents. Obviously, the more one moves from particular roles to the broader work environment (i – iii above) the more complex these descriptions are likely to become.

As Foucault (1972:49) reminds us discourses 'are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. The decision about the appropriateness of a particular discourse is not neutral. Barnett (1994) draws upon a discourse of distinction between 'scientific knowledge' and 'tacit forms of knowing bound up in the professional's concrete activities' and Copper et al (2010:xiii) on a discourse of 'the intersection and engagement of theoretical and practice learning'. The difficult

with both discourses is that they seek to overcome a dichotomy between theory and practice. Hirst (1999), dealing primarily with schooling, identifies as a critical error in liberal accounts of education the assumption that theoretical knowledge directly informs practical wisdom. Discourses that place theory and practice in such a way perpetuate this same error. MacIntyre (1987) notes that a certain deformation occurs to academic disciplines during the enlightenment. This deformation results from the separation of these disciplines from their primary task, which is the resolution of practical problems. It is therefore not surprising that academia articulates its central tasks in terms of a distinction between theory and practice and the need to overcome such a distinction. It results from its own distortion as essentially separated from practical wisdom.

In this context, work-based learning tends to become a practical context in which education can overcome this theory-practice divide (articulated in terms of application or in terms of moving to understand knowledge in the 'real world'). This is always significantly limiting in adequately describing work roles and the development of practical agents, and yet alternative discourses focus on the *competency* to achieve practical tasks (I think here of NVQ models of education), which are problematic for higher education (see Barnett, 1994) and neglect the *wisdom* in 'practical wisdom'.

MacIntyre (1985) offers a discourse of practice grounded in a neo-Aristotelian account of practical action. A central element in his account is a 'social practice'. Identifying work as a social practice focuses not on the relationship between theory and practice, but one what is required in order to 'pursue excellence' in that practice, and on the institutional arrangements (i.e. the workplaces and organisations) necessary for that practice to be sustained. In particular the discourse directs one to give consideration to:

1. The identification of the internal goods
2. The identification and description of the various agent roles involved
3. The nature of the co-operation between agents
4. The dispositions and skills required by different agents in order to collectively pursue excellence

It is worth noting that for MacIntyre internal goods, which are the ones that agents ought to pursue are not money, status or power (these he defines as external goods). For example, if you are in the business of widget manufacture then the goal ought to be to make good widgets not money (though later might follow from the former).

In conclusion, in order to spell out what ought and can be learnt in the workplace, one needs to describe the activity and agency necessary for pursuing excellence. The choice of discourse is pivotal and the traditional discourses dominant in higher education promote an unnecessary and unproductive polarisation of theory and practice alongside proposals to ameliorate this polarisation. The discourse of practical wisdom, in this case drawn from MacIntyre, rejects the polarisation as the product of a distortion of academia itself. It offers a model for developing work-based programmes and, as a by-product, redeem academia itself.

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