

'What Constitutes (Work-based) Knowledge?' (0276)

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The conference outline asks, 'are we swapping wisdom for information?' This paper argues that we need both as they overlap, along with knowledge, experience, skills and similar terms. Learning which takes place in, for and about the workplace can easily be conflated with 'training' and 'skills, and as a consequence, denigrated. It seems ironic that the more diverse and widespread knowledge can be, the more undervalued it becomes. This same derision is increasingly applied to the former 'seats of knowledge', higher education institutions, now often disparagingly referred to as 'training shops', for their involvement with business and their growing portfolios of vocationally slanted curricula, presumed to lack sufficient neutrality and rigour. HE should prepare students for life, and work plays a large part in the majority of people's lives. Furthermore, can wisdom ever be truly achieved without reflection and experience, and where will this experience come from for most of the population? The workplace instigates and sustains collaboration and facilitates the sharing of ideas and expertise. Academia can both benefit from and enrich this with innovative programmes which meet the outcomes for employers and employees/students by sharing the broad research capacity, analytical prowess and quality assurance inherent in HE's DNA. In his recent Higher Education speech Vince Cable (Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills) tries to summarise what higher education offers, '... learning how to learn, learning how to think; intellectual curiosity; the challenge and excitement of new ideas...' (BIS, 2010B).

We are living in rapidly changing times, emphasised by the future-focused nature of much current UK government policy, with its emphasis on gaining knowledge and expertise for job roles and industries that do not even exist yet. Language is endlessly ambiguous but postmodern theory offers some rich comparisons with the work-based learning (WBL) concept of knowledge as: fragmented and often hard to place in categories; involving reflection and constant updating; non-linear, but

rather gained at any time and sometimes even acknowledged retrospectively. However, in an unavoidable paradigm shift, postmodernism itself is now seen to be giving way to new cultural dominants, like digimodernism, a product of globalisation and the digital revolution (Kirby 2010) and similarly concepts of what constitutes WBL knowledge must develop to embrace the widely varying contexts in which knowledge is produced, gained, built upon and used.

Jean-François Lyotard advocated some thirty years ago that it was no longer possible to quantify and label knowledge in the traditional ways. His examples of gaining and storing knowledge by reference to embedding microchips in the brain were labelled by many as far-fetched, however, they now seem less like science-fiction, in the light of the massive strides made with technological developments such as the internet, indeed all learners now believe that if they do not know something they know how to find out, and it is not usually by asking a lecturer or reading a book. The dominance of reality television has created a similar effect, in that the feeling of 'knowing' is commonplace, when in fact due to living vicariously through the widely broadcasted proliferation of experiences of others, 'knowing' is being conflated with 'knowing of'. Work-based learners do not simply 'know of', they know by doing.

Dictionary definitions of 'knowledge' vary widely and sometimes even conflict, it can mean 'information' and 'facts', but also 'understanding'. Furthermore, they range from 'acquaintance' and 'awareness', to 'familiarity', which seem clearly to be opposite meanings. It seems obvious from this wide range of potential meanings for 'knowledge' (and types of knowledge) that there must be widely varying contexts in which knowledge is produced, gained, built upon and used and that this must stretch beyond academia to encompass work, social and community uses and must move beyond the ancient hierarchical model of knowledge being passed down to an empty (and lucky) recipient?

Higher Education is increasingly under pressure to create perfect employees; developed, rounded and able to fulfil potential – capable, in the workforce of the future, of adapting, evolving and changing. These generic attributes are often being cited by employers now as more vital than subject-specific skills (Helyer & Lee, 2010). Recent government publications have emphasised the crucial role that Higher Education has to play in both the UK’s recovery from economic recession and the future prosperity and success of the country. HE level skills are attained via a formal programme of study, through life and work experience or by some combination. They might represent an entire degree, or a small award, or a professional/vocational qualifications. Although the word ‘skills’ is a much used (and maligned) one I am taking HE interaction to be a catalyst for the development of skills, knowledge, expertise, wisdom, talent, acumen, intelligence and so on.

Employers expect an HE level student to have gained generic, transferable employability skills, such as presentation skills, thinking strategically and analytically, working independently and being creative. HE students need a learning experience which helps them to respond to what their employers (indeed their lives) expect of them going forward; to finish their studies wanting to continue to learn and develop, enthused by the ethos of continuous professional and personal development embedded in their higher level learning. The themes of The Leitch Review, *Prosperity for all in the Global Economy, World Class Skills* (2006), are still being cited by the UK Government as key issues requiring attention: rapid technological innovation; an ageing population and workforce; the connections between a workforce educated to HE level and productivity/profitability and the need to continually enhance and refine existing education and qualifications, in line with market intelligence. The review famously reported that 70% of the 2020 UK working population had already left school (2006) making employees the major target of national policies about knowledge, skills and HE education. Any HE conception of knowledge in the workplace would include experience and/or practice based knowledge, for many new graduates, in times of economic downturn and

recession, gaining this experience is not an option and this also must be faced in national education policies. **words - 999**

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