

## **Postmodern or Late modern? What counts as knowledge in Work Based Learning? (0306)**

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In such a short paper as this it is impossible to summarise what is meant by the terms 'Late or High Modern' and 'Postmodern' and then go on to say why I think such ideas are crucial to understanding the competing conceptions of knowledge in Work Based Learning (WBL) so please forgive the brevity.

The starting point for defining modernism is Descartes (1996), the father or perhaps more accurately chief ideologue for the Enlightenment. His view that universal, objective truth can be identified by means of rational discourse and enquiry underpin our conception of the modern world. Tied up with this is the idea of progressive social development based upon increasing theoretical sophistication justified by experimental proof of the nature of reality. Various strands of this way of thinking have been the dominant mode of thinking in western societies since the seventeenth century, manifest in the steady advances in science and technology which have underlain progressive economic and social development. Western universities have played a crucial role in both upholding these values and generating new forms of knowledge to further our understanding of the world.

According to some, western societies in recent years have undergone such profound change that it is now impossible to believe in progressionism. Increasing social division and polarity, economic transformation, lack of faith in traditional centres of authority (religious, political, scientific) and an increasing awareness that our personal beliefs are essentially social constructions has led a number of philosophers and social scientists to argue that the world we now inhabit is so complex and fractured that establishing meaning has become almost impossible. In a world where we no longer are willing to accept the narratives constructed for us by the powerful, our own lived experience is a more reliable guide to developing understanding. For thinkers like Lyotard (1984) the 'grand narrative' of a progressive, unified western culture no longer makes sense. Indeed many of our core beliefs are cultural artefacts which obey the formal rules of narrative (ie a social construction) rather than signifying any underlying social reality. For others such as Derrida (1976) almost all our 'rational' assumptions and beliefs can be reduced to absurdity if we strip them to their essentials by means of 'deconstruction' of those narratives. According to Baudrillard understanding of the world has become almost impossible because of the powerful and misleading forces which shape our understanding such that our perception of our own lives becomes a simulation of reality- what he terms 'hyperreality'. The reason we cannot understand the world is because we are unable to see beyond the constructed realities portrayed in the mass media, created to serve the interests of the powerful. A classic example of his analysis is his argument that the Gulf War did not take place- or rather some events occurred but our own understanding was shaped by a media narrative written before events actually occurred according to a 'script' which serves the interests of the most powerful interests in western society (Baudrillard 2004) Another leading theorist, Foucault (1974; 2003) is a little harder to place not least because he denied ever being postmodern. Like Derrida he sees what is constructed as knowledge as reflecting the interests of the powerful but his interest is in relating knowledge and power to historical development. He characterises the twentieth century as the era of the primacy of scientific truth- implying that (as in the past) in future it may not be.

Postmodernism has had a remarkable influence in literature, music and film and to some extent in universities but it has also been subject to considerable backlash. Late or high modernists such as Giddens (2008) do not disagree about the development of rampant individualism, shallow consumerism, the lack of trust in established authority and traditional narratives and the fascination with surface appearance over content. Where he disagrees is the persistence of recognisable social structures and institutions. There is still capitalism, albeit one fully globalised and there is still a class structure albeit defined in terms of global advantage. According to Giddens, where we differ in terms of our perception of the world is the result of our traditional identities established by collective affiliations being eroded and replaced by a more personal, individualised conception of the self. Beck (2002) is also interested in the effects of individualism and ascribes it as the cause of our search for a safer, risk free world, manifest in our desire for gated communities, more punitive attitudes towards criminals, SPVs and the increased prevalence of health scares. Habermas rejects notions of societal fracturing. For him society is still rationally ordered (although the nature of the order constantly adapts) via 'communicative rationality'. He rejects the idea that we are unable to understand the world around us and not only make sense of it but communicate its meaning one to another. As our responses to change are rational so our social structures reflect our changed circumstances. Similarly Habermas (1981) seeks to defend the legacy of the Enlightenment and the idea of verifiable truths.

All of this may seem some way from WBL but I believe it helps us to understand differences between personal ideologies among tutors and students alike and differing conceptions of the validity of knowledge. For example I have little doubt that many WBL tutors are still operating within an essentially modernist conception of knowledge. I have seen WBL learning outcomes which emphasise the importance of acquiring theoretical over situated knowledge and the students duly demonstrate their familiarity with theory, with occasional references to real life experience. This is a conception of knowledge which accepts the grand narrative. This states there is a hierarchy of knowledge which has been established through formal theorising and empirical testing and that it held as an eternal flame by the custodians of the Enlightenment, the university. Following instruction by the tutor (in a cohort) in this knowledge, the principal role of the student is to demonstrate familiarity with the canon and verify its universality by reference to lived experience. At the other end of the spectrum there are postmodern minded WBL tutors for whom no such canon exists and the primary source of knowledge is not the university at all but lived experience supplemented by sources of information the student (individually) finds useful. For such tutors the notion of 'valid' underpinning subject knowledge has little real meaning since the only knowledge which is relevant is that which the situated learner chances upon and feels is relevant. There are also late or high modernists who emphasise the value of situated learning but do not wish to dispense with the canon. There may be modernists, postmodernists and high modernists within the same tutor team. Within my own team there is a preponderance of late modernists but we also have postmodernists. One tutor left higher education altogether because of what he felt is a very narrow conception of appropriate knowledge. Others have left for a variety of reasons. From my observation the postmodernists tend to be popular with students but immensely bored with and impatient with process but I think it is to them that we owe the presence of our highly flexible Work Based and Integrative Studies programme. Having tutors with different ideologies in respect of appropriate knowledge is one thing: but WBL in empowering the learner also allows them to have a far more powerful say as to what constitutes knowledge. One of our largest clients is a training

company which bases its practice on NLP. As a fully paid up member of the late modernists I would have a problem with this because I do not personally accept the claims to being 'scientific' made by NLP's advocates. So at the time of writing we are planning to appoint a new tutor but beware: postmodernists only need apply!

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