Researching the Implementation of Work-based Learning within Higher Education: Questioning Collusion and Resistance

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Abstract: *This paper develops a framework for characterising the range of work-based learning practices within higher education. It suggests some directions for research in the context of competing discourses.*

Introduction

This paper aims to explore a framework for research which will help us understand the activities associated with work-based learning (WBL), particularly within the context of higher education. Our use of WBL in this context refers to learning through work (i.e., through engagement in the activities and purposes of the workplace).

Work-based learning is not a new type of activity. It has a long history associated, for example with various types of apprenticeship. It is also not new within higher education, in so far as areas such as medicine, education and social work have included work-based learning as central elements in their programmes for many years. However, it has now been explicitly recognised through the allocation of credit, and named as an important form of learning. It is also increasingly advocated in policy literature as an important form of provision which will establish new relationships between higher education and the world of work. This can be seen as part of a wider set of changes in the economy, society and the role of higher education. This paper aims to explore a framework which will help us analyse the nature and extent of these changes. However, it must be recognised that these changes are often issues of conflict and contestation and as a result change is limited and uneven.

The Context of WBL Development

The development of WBL can be understood as part of a more wide ranging set of changes associated with the development of mass higher education. Scott sets this in the context of "post industrial" and "post Fordist" society, and refers to a number of important changes in the economy which help to create the context for these developments. These include the shift from manufacturing to services, the emergence of the global economy, and the information technology/hyperautomation revolution in industry (Scott, 1995). However a number of analysts, drawing on the work of Foucault have argued that these changes and their impact, can best be understood through the perspective of discourses (Edwards, 1997). Ball has argued that "discourses are… about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with what authority" (Ball, 1990, p. 17). However these discourses do not merely shape our understanding of these changes, they are themselves important elements of change. "Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them, and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (Foucault, 1977, p. 49). In this paper we will draw on these perspectives in developing a framework for the analysis of WBL.

A number discourses have been identified in the analysis of lifelong learning and WBL (Edwards, 1997; Solomon & McIntyre, 1999; Garrick 1999). For the purposes of this paper we wish to consider two discourses which it can be argued have been of particular importance in understanding how the implications of economic change have influenced developments within higher education, and particularly the emergence of WBL. The first of these is *flexibility*. Garrick and Usher have described this as "a key metaphor vivifying a number of contemporary life discourses" (Garrick & Usher, 1999, p. 61). Within this discourse are a number of related discourses of flexible organisational structures, flexible learning to promote multi-skilling and up-skilling, and flexible workers (who are to be self motivating and self regulating). Flexible learning opportunities should therefore provide the opportunities for workers to develop these attributes (Garrick & Usher). The second discourse which is

of particular relevance at this level is *the knowledge based society.* An increasing number of policy documents, and human resource management texts emphasise the key role of knowledge, and "knowledge workers" in ensuring success in the modern economy (EC, 1995). This is associated with the importance of "intellectual capital," and the need to create conditions which will foster the development of this capital. (Edvinnson & Malone, 1997). This raises key issues about the nature of the knowledge which must be acquired. We will return to this below. It also raises issues about how this knowledge can be acquired and renewed. The increasing emphasis on enabling employees to be flexible workers, and on the management of intellectual capital, has led to the emergence of the discourse of the *learning organisation* (Burgoyne, 1992). While employees are expected to be self-motivating in this context, the responsibility for structuring the learning processes now rests with the organisation. This enables a closer link between the learning process of the individual and the goals of the organisation, contributing to what Garrick and Usher have described as the "management of subjectivity." They suggest that this is now a key task for organisations if workers are expected to be self-developing, self-motivating and self-regulating.

The discourses outlined above relate to the issues of change in the economy and the implications for learning. Associated with these are a further sub-set of more specific discourses which have emerged, and which we would suggest are of particular relevance in understanding the development of WBL over recent years. The discourses which we have identified have been derived from the analysis of key policy documents over the past 10 years in the UK.

The first of these discourses is *partnership.* This can be seen to be related to the idea of de-differentiation which Edwards identifies as a key element associated with the development of lifelong learning, in which boundaries between previously separate organisations or sectors become blurred. This emphasises the importance of higher education institutions (HEIs) developing partnerships with employers and was a major theme of the UK Employment Department documents of the early 90s (ED, 1990). Associated with this are issues regarding the need for negotiation of structure and content of programmes (ED, 1992). It is suggested that developments of this kind will involve an element of

loss of control for HEIs, but this is presented as an important element of change with which they must come to terms.

Flexibility. This discourse, an element within the wider discourse which we have already discussed, can be seen as a major theme in many policy documents regarding the need for change in HE and particularly the development of WBL, produced during the 1990s. The Employment Department stated that its aim was to "… promote FE and HE which is high quality, flexible and responds cost-effectively to the changing needs of employers, individuals and the labour market" (ED, 1994). Associated with this was the idea of *responsiveness* and the need for universities to respond to changes and to "make this a way of life" (DfEE, 1997). This has then given rise to a number of sub-themes regarding time, place, and content. With respect to content an important theme has been the development of core/transferable skills for flexible workers (NAGCELL, 1997).

Relevance. In this respect there has been a growing emphasis on knowledge which is characterised by being produced in the context of application, as distinct from traditional discipline based knowledge. This has been referred to as Mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al, 1994). This raises important questions regarding the role of other agencies in this process of knowledge creation. WBL has been presented as having a key role in helping HE to "meet the needs" of collaborating employers (ED, 1990).

The final discourse we wish to emphasise is that of *accreditation.* This discourse refers to the recognising and giving value to a wide range of learning experiences, many of which would not previously have been deemed worthy of credit within HE. Within this context it has been argued that WBL can be of equal value to traditional academic learning, and should receive equal credit (ED, 1994).

Researching Work-based Learning

Our interest in this paper is in outlining an approach to researching the practices of WBL in HE – the "how" of WBL – by which we mean the forms it takes and the ways in which people are currently engaging in it. It was suggested above that what may be emerging within the policy of those promoting (and funding) WBL development, are more specific discourses which are attempting to shape the forms of WBL which are becoming established

in HE. Notions of partnership, relevance, flexibility and accreditation may be significant in implying the need for certain changes in the curriculum, pedagogy, and relationships associated with WBL. Our interest then is in exploring the significance of such discourses in the emerging practices of WBL, and the extent and nature of the changes these practices represent in HE. However, as various commentators (Ball, 1994; Soloman & McIntyre, forthcoming) have reminded us the implementation of policy is problematic and in the practice itself control or dominance can never be totally secured (Ball, 1994). What we aim to sketch out then is a framework within which one might research the "messiness" of implementation of WBL. Going beyond, as Ball has suggested, the binary of dominance/resistance to these discourses, in part to explore the third space of "other concerns, demands, pressures, purposes and desires" (Ball, 1994, p. 11).

In outlining approaches to research in this terrain one perhaps needs to first map out some of the territory of WBL; what after all is the scope of one's investigation? However, attempts to categorise WBL practices may be seen as problematic in a context of researching the messiness of practice or hybrid practices. Not withstanding that danger we will review categorisations provided by other authors before suggesting a framework which may help to characterise a range of WBL. In the UK WBL in HE was given its initial impetus during the 1990s by a number of government programmes which funded a range of WBL projects under two categories: those which focused on introducing WBL for "traditional" students, and those which concentrated on people already in employment. Subsequent categorisations have tended to reflect this student/worker binary (Brennan & Little, 1996). However, WBL is itself contributing to the permeability of these identities. We can now find examples of full time workers who, through WBL, are undertaking the equivalent of a full-time programme, and of full-time students who use their own part-time work as a context for WBL. We will therefore suggest alternative ways of characterising WBL in our framework below.

Soloman and McIntyre (forthcoming) have described a continuum of practices in the integration of work into the curriculum reserving the term Work-based Learning Awards for programmes which are related to corporate objectives and are highly individualised. In the context of our research there is perhaps a danger in focusing too much on this radical extreme. Firstly, we recognise that the amount of work-based learning activity within HE in the UK is itself somewhat limited at present (Brennan & Little, 1996) whilst provision at this "cutting edge" is even more so. Secondly, our aim is to research the more "partial" WBL spaces to examine those practices which emerge from the accommodations made by different players, where tensions between competing discourses emerge and make their appearance in more hybrid practices.

So in framing the research we would resist assigning WBL to particular categories but think in terms of a number of spectrums of practices. Our initial mapping of these spectrums (outlined below) draws on the range of practices noted in the literature (Brennan & Little, 1996; Leeds, 1999) and in particular on the investigations of a WBL development project at Glasgow Caledonian University which gathered examples of practice from a number of HEIs in the UK. The framework (see Figure 1) identifies a number of individual dimensions within curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment which provide multiple locations for WBL practices (in relation to HE and the workplace). The central issues of control and negotiation are played out through different types of relationships (represented vertically as working on each of these dimensions).

Such a framework reminds us that WBL practices may vary in the extent of their "radicalism" and that HEI and employers may seek to concentrate their "control" in particular areas of the programme rather than across the whole programme. For example, WBL assessment may be designed to mirror more established forms of assessment, such as the project report, in order to secure approval for more innovative curriculum structures. In using even multiple spectrums we are mindful of the dangers of labelling practices as simply colluding with or resisting the powerful discourses at play in WBL. Instead we are interested in using the different dimensions to identify spaces in which developers and learners may be able to, as Farrell (1999) suggests, "work the discourses" drawing on local practices to shape knowledge and identity.

Figure 1. Framework for thinking about the range of WBL practices

Relationships	Curriculum
• Who are the key players in the WBL (i.e. HEI, employer, trade union, professional body, other ac-crediting body, individual learners. • To what extent are aspects ne-gotiable and with whom? • Where does control rest?	• WBL is minor part of ⟷ WBL is major part of programme whole programme • Content relates to existing HEI ⟷ Content relates to work roles subject areas or organisational objectives
	Pedagogy • Learning activities and pace ⟷ Learning activity and pace arise structured by HEI from work roles • Key people in support drawn ⟷ Key people in support drawn from HEI workplace
	Assessment • Assessment mechanisms ⟷ Assessment mechanisms aimed aimed at HEI purpose at work purpose • Key people in assessment ⟷ Key people in assessment drawn drawn from HEI from workplace

Since our aim is to explore the forms of WBL which are being established in HE, the work of Bloomer (1997) may be helpful in highlighting two aspects to the construction of the curriculum: the prescriptive (which attempts to prescribe what the student experience will be) and the descriptive (primarily the learner's perceptions of what "actually" happens). This distinction points to the different levels of work being done in establishing a WBL programme in HE, the development of programme specifications (learning outcomes, proforma for learning contracts) and the use that individuals (or groups) make of these specifica-tions. Bloomer concentrates on the descriptions which are accessible primarily through students (although some mention is made of others who have knowledge of the descriptive curriculum through their knowledge of students). However, in the case of WBL these others (university tutors, WBL fa-cilitators and workplace mentors) may take on a much more important role in mediating between the prescribed curriculum of the developers and the at-tempts of learners to engage in WBL (Brennan & Little, 1996), perhaps thereby contributing to the description of WBL at the individual level.

Let us now look at one of the key dimensions identified above, control over the content of the cur-riculum. In examining a particular WBL develop-ment at an institution we might ask questions at both the prescriptive and descriptive levels. In ex-amining the prescriptive construction of the cur-riculum we might consider: What kinds of knowledge and skills are presented as the focus for the WBL? How are they represented and organised? And who appears to be involved in this process of identification? Such questions shed some light on the significance, in a practice context, of the dis-courses which may be emerging at the policy level – such as partnership, relevance, flexibility, and ac-creditation– the strength of alternative established discourses within HE, and the contribution of other concerns and pressures. What, for example, can these questions reveal about the ways in which "control" of the curriculum is being managed and conveyed; what is not visible in these processes? What sort of relationships or "partnerships" does the programme construct? Are these programmes positioning themselves as addressing different types of knowledge and skills to existing HE, and where do they draw their authority from? What room is

there in these constructions for agency on the part of the learner, employer or tutor? What is the interplay with more established values within HE, such as the primacy of research-based knowledge, or the new pressures of quality assurance and standardisation?

Of course as Bloomer reminds us the understanding of WBL which one might gain from examining the prescriptive curriculum is partial. Exploring the content of the programme with learners, university tutors and workplace mentors might enable one to approach the more descriptive layer. Central to this process would be an examination of the process of constructing learning plans - often described as a "negotiation" between these three key players. What are the concerns of learners and advisors in this process? In what sense do the advisors take on a role akin to that identified by Farrell (drawing on Flairclough) of "discourse technologists" in the workplace? To what extent are they engaging in their own working of the discourses? In the case of WBL in HE who becomes the primary mediator, the tutor from the HEI or the mentor from the workplace? Where might there be spaces left open for more creative responses from learners and their advisors?

Conclusion

We have begun to outline an approach to research in WBL which highlights the uneven nature of its development in HE. By examining the key dimensions of WBL at both the prescriptive and descriptive level of the curriculum we hope to explore the interplay between the discourses of WBL which may be emerging at a local policy level, the strengths of established discourses and the concerns of developers. This approach provides an opportunity to identify the complexity of the new practices of WBL.

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