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Linking Theory to Practice in the Workplace

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been increased attention devoted to conducting professional education and vocational training in the workplace (Burns, Boud and Garrick). Decades ago, vocational education and training was primarily based on the apprenticeship model whereby the novitiate learned "on the job" under the tutelage of the master or craftsman. More recently, almost all professional education and vocational training is located in tertiary institutions, often incorporating a practicum or field experience component in which students learn to relate theory to practice, and learn from the experience gained in the practicum.

The authors have been involved in the practical training of police constables and law graduates respectively, in New South Wales. Preparatory training of new entrants into both professions has undergone restructuring in recent years, with greater emphasis on the role of the practicum. The approach to that role in each of these professions is considerably different, yet in the authors' experience, both raise similar issues of concern in their implementation.

Police Constable Training in New South Wales

The New South Wales Police Service is comprised of over 17,000 personnel. A recent (1997) reappraisal of police training has restructured recruit training. Recruits now study to become police officers for six trimesters (2 years) to obtain a Diploma of Policing Practice awarded by Charles Sturt University for the NSW Police Service. Practicum experiences are offered in Trimesters 2 (when recruits spend 160 hours in both a police station and in a community service agency) and 4, 5 and 6 (each in a police station) with a particularly heavy phase during Trimester 6 when the emphasis is on students finalizing their development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes to become a competent "One-Stop-Officer."

Preparation for Admission to Legal Practice in New South Wales

In New South Wales, prospective lawyers must first complete an accredited academic tertiary qualification (most usually, the LLB degree) followed by pre-admission preparation for legal practice – generally referred to as "practical legal training" or PLT. "Articles of clerkship" (a form of apprenticeship) were abolished in New South Wales 25 years ago, and replaced initially by a six month period of institutional training, after which the graduate was admitted to practice as a solicitor under supervision. In the process, whatever the merits or otherwise of articling, the master/clerk relationship of mutual obligations of teaching and learning in the workplace was also abolished. In 1994, this regime was replaced by a six-month period of training of which 15 weeks were undertaken by intensive on-campus training and the balance by 15 weeks of "professional experience."

Thus, in both professions, a pre-entry component of professional experience or practicum is now complementary to the theoretical knowledge acquired for practice. But the approach of each profession is significantly different: the field experience of police recruits occurs in a bureaucratic, rank-structured operation, as an integrated process of theoretical and practical training, whereas the field experience of law graduates occurs in a "loosely coupled" (Weick) and detached organization.

Implementation Issues

The essence of effective field placement or workplace experience is to contribute to the learning of the new recruit or embryo practitioner. Billett notes the following implications of workplace learning settings: firstly, that the process in the workplace setting must be conceptualized as a learning process, not a teaching process; secondly, that the learning process must be embedded into the socio-cultural context in which the learning takes place; thirdly, that the kinds of activities that individuals engage in determine what they learn, and that the

kind of guidance they access in that learning will determine the quality of the learning.

There are two factors in the combination of institutional training and field experience which are not entirely within the control of course designers and administrators. Firstly, while the structured training can be evaluated and adjusted for quality training, the quality of field experience obtained will depend upon the quality of experience actually offered to the student in the workplace. Secondly, although objectives and guidelines can be set for field experience by the training institution, the acknowledgment and assumption of the purpose of the experience or of the role of principals or supervisors as set out in those guidelines can be of variable standard. Consequently, the inclusion of field experience in courses for the preparation of professionals raises another issue of concern, that of supporting those who provide the guidance for students involved in workplace learning activities.

“Supervision” and “Mentoring”

The authors are interested to explore the learning outcomes in the workplace in terms of the differences between “supervision” and “mentorship” of the trainee. The concept of “mentoring,” a regular part of vocational training in such professions as teaching and nursing, has recently re-surfaced as an important issue in workplace learning generally. Is “supervision” the same thing as “mentoring?” The difference is reflected in the separate objectives of the workplace host in assuming a role in the provision of the trainee’s practical experience, and its own concern with learning outcomes as an organizational objective vis-a-vis the student’s personal learning objectives.

Burns points out that mentoring usually includes not only the imparting of knowledge and skills, but also of the norms and mores of the workplace. In both legal practice and policing, at least two critical aspects of norms and mores of the workplace are client service and ethical integrity. The role of a supervisor or mentor can be critical in acculturating a new entrant into the profession in these aspects of practice.

The authors observe that in both policing and in lawyer training, the bureaucratic or hierarchical nature of the organization can impede the learning

process. Supervisors of police recruits are concerned to maintain rank structure and discipline. Supervisors of trainee lawyers tend to focus on the firm’s organizational goals rather than on the learning needs of individual employees.

Research Issues

Both authors are currently examining ways of developing a learning culture in organizations involved in offering the practicum program in their respective areas. Some of the exploratory questions, which are the focus of their research, are set out below:

1. In developing a model of training and workplace learning, should training and field experience be sequential (that is regarded as separate stages of professional training) or integrated (i.e., interrelated in some way)? Is it different for different professions?
2. How do we ensure that workplace learning/experience is a learning process and not just a teaching process or simply the acquisition of “experience?”
3. What needs to be done to enhance the relationship between the training institution and the operatives in the field responsible for delivery of the workplace experience?
4. Should, and if so, how do we distinguish between supervision and mentorship, and what training and guidance should be made available to supervisors and mentors in the workplace?
5. If, in a large bureaucratic or hierarchical organization, it is not possible for mentors and mentees to select each other, what professional training opportunities should be available to each to ensure the preservation of the learning process for the mentee? What are the ideal characteristics of mentors, and how can we ensure that persons chosen as mentors/supervisors possess these characteristics? Further, what professional training and development opportunities should be available to mentors/supervisors to carry out their role effectively?
6. More generically, how can the practicum be used to improve the learning culture of the host organization, e.g. in respect to establishing a positive climate for focussed learning.