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The workplace as a site for learning: Challenges and possibilities
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Abstract

In recent times increasing emphasis has been given to the need for contemporary workers to be highly-skilled, adaptable and flexible, able to readily apply existing knowledge and skills to new situations, and prepared and capable of engaging in new learning as circumstances warrant. Universities have been challenged in these circumstances to respond with 'work ready' graduates and with curriculum and pedagogy that is more relevant to the workplace. One response from universities has been to explore ways in which the workplace can be more effectively integrated into the university experience through cooperative programs with industry.

The workplace is thus increasingly present as a learning resource and a site of learning in the university sector. This paper explores the role of current literature on workplace learning in informing the implementation of workplace learning - either work placements, internships, or activities drawing upon students' workplace experiences for learning. Drawing on the work of a range of authors in this field, including Eraut (2004), Kemmis (2005) and Billett (2006), we examine the nature of workplace learning and explore the challenges and possibilities of the workplace as a site for learning. The convergence between work-related skills and knowledge, and work-related personal dispositions is highlighted and pedagogical implications arising from this are discussed.

Keywords: workplace learning, reflexivity, work integrated learning, employability skills, graduate attributes.

Introduction

We are told that the contemporary workforce needs to be highly-skilled, adaptable and flexible. Such an 'adaptable, multi-skilled and flexible workforce', implies one which can quickly and willingly apply existing knowledge and skills to new situations, and one which is prepared and capable of engaging in new learning as circumstances warrant. There are two related features of this new vision of the contemporary worker: one is the need to continually learn and update skills, presumably largely through experiences in the workplace; and the other is the need for a particular attitude or disposition towards work.

For universities this presents particular challenges. There is a dual expectation that universities will not only provide learners with work-ready knowledge and skill, but also with what may be called the 'soft skills': the dispositions, personal qualities and ways of being in the world that allow them to thrive and continue to learn (Barnett, 2006, p.50).

With respect to 'work-ready' knowledge and skill universities have explored ways in which the workplace can be more effectively integrated into the university experience. This typically occurs through professional placements in say, architecture, cooperative education arrangements in business and engineering, clinical placements in medicine and nursing, practicum experience in teacher education, and in some instances, work-based learning awards where the work itself forms the basis of the curriculum. In addition, there is now a general acceptance of work-related projects and learning contracts as valid pedagogical tools. The workplace is thus increasingly present as a learning resource and a site of learning in the university sector.

In many ways this is to be expected, given the growth in the demand for continuing professional education, and given the high number of mature age students in universities who insist on a

curriculum and pedagogy that is relevant to their workplace experiences. This engagement with the workplace has led to a challenge to the traditional disciplines, partly because workplace problems are not neatly packaged into disciplinary areas, and partly because knowledge is increasingly seen as being 'produced' in the workplace. Indeed the idea of knowledge being produced in the academy and subsequently 'applied' to work, family and community life, is no longer the sole way of depicting the relationship between the academy and the workplace.

With respect to the so-called 'soft skills', there has been a great deal of interest with identifying the employability skills developed at all levels and in all sectors of education. A consistent message from various reports into the skills needed is that while technical skills are recognised as important, by far the greater emphasis is placed on a range of generic skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, ongoing learning, creativity, cultural understanding, entrepreneurship and leadership. Universities have responded to this by attempting to specify what are generally called 'graduate attributes', 'generic skills' or 'employability skills'.

While work-related learning can of course include a range of teaching strategies within universities, the key focus of this paper is what universities can learn from current understandings of workplace learning: that is, how learning can be drawn from experiences in workplace settings.

The workplace as a site for learning

How do we enhance the student experience in work integrated learning programs? In the following section we draw on current understandings of workplace learning to explore the pedagogy that can inform work integrated learning programs. Eraut (2004) points to some crucial questions for those in universities concerned with either work placements or internships, or who draw upon students' workplace experiences for learning:

What do we expect students to learn from experiences in workplace settings?
How will learning take place?
What factors will influence this type of learning?

The workplace learning literature helps us respond to these questions highlighting both the different kinds of skills and knowledge gained from workplace settings and the need to think differently about learning in the workplace.

Kemmis (2005), for example, argues that 'professional practice knowledge': cannot be understood just from the perspective of knowledge 'in the heads' of individual (p.402). He analyses the kind of thinking – the practical reasoning - that is characteristic of the expert professional practitioner. Expert practitioners, he argues, are able to think reflexively and change their reading of a situation 'as it unfolds in and through practice' (p.392). It is a mistake, he believes, to think about the workplace curriculum in terms of what needs to be 'in the heads' of students when they enter work settings.

> conceptualising what can be known in advance of practice captures only some of the features of the practices with which they are concerned. Harder to capture are the material, social, discursive and historical conditions and relations that shape and sometimes disfigure practice. To develop practitioners, practices, understandings of practice, and the changing settings of practice requires not only personal reflection in action, but also collaborative efforts by practitioners and those they serve to explore and grasp the complex and uncertain material, social, discursive and historical conditions of practice (p.422).

Hager (2004) adopts a similar position when he critiques what he regards as the dominant view of learning as 'adding more substance' to the mind, which is a kind of container. On Hager's account this learning-as-product mindset is based on two flawed assumptions, at least in so far as it applies

to workplace learning. The first of these is that the products of learning are relatively stable over time, allowing knowledge to be incorporated into curriculum documents and textbooks and examined in standard achievement tests. The second assumption is that learning is replicable and comparable across learners, allowing us to make comparisons of their relative 'attainment'. Taken together, these assumptions support the view that practice is simply the application of theory: that there are general solutions to practical problems that can be developed outside of practice and that can be codified for application to the workplace. However Hager argues that practice is much messier than this. For example practitioners are not generally presented with 'ready made' problems

The 'situated learning' approach of Billlet (1994, 2006) advances the view that different forms of social practices lead to different ways of appropriating and structuring knowledge. He argues that there are a variety of knowledge sources in a community of practice (such as other workers, hints, reminders, explanations, observations, listening, dealing with authentic problems, one's personal history), and that these have an impact on the way knowledge is appropriated and structured. He notes the constraints on the types of learning experiences available to workers, such as access to expensive equipment, employer and manager support for learning, the interests of co-workers in supporting other workers' learning and development, the influence of workplace affiliations and cliques, and so on

The view that learning is an 'integral and inseparable aspect of social practice' is emphasised by Lave and Wenger (1991, p.31). Learning is not so much a matter of individuals acquiring mastery over knowledge and processes of reasoning, it is a matter of co-participants engaging in a community of practice. The focus is thus on the community rather than the individual. Allied to this view of the learner is a rejection of the idea that learners acquire structures or schemata through which they understand the world. It is participation frameworks, which have structure, not the mental representations of individuals.

Three themes are present in much of the literature on workplace learning: the emphasis on the social and cultural nature of learning, the rejection of the 'mind as a container' metaphor, and the attention given to the kinds of personal dispositions and qualities necessary to be an effective workplace learner. We now turn our attention to the last of these.

Work related personal dispositions

The 'soft skills' that stand out and are repeated time and again in numerous government and intergovernmental agency reports worldwide are teamwork, managing relationships, a capacity for innovation, enterprising skills, self management, learning skills, flexibility, adaptability, creativity, and a capacity for critical reflection on self, others, and the broader context. An overarching competency is described in the *Definition and Selection of Competencies Report* (cited in Rychen & Salganik, 2003) as:

> Reflectivity – a critical stance and reflective practice- has been identified as the required competence level to meet the multifaceted demands of modern life in a responsible way….an overall development of critical thinking and a reflective integrated practice based on formal an informal knowledge and experience of life (p. 4)

Change and renewal are features of contemporary workplaces. Most changes imply a reorientation of persons' values or attitudes, the way they see themselves, and their organisational knowledge (tacit, explicit and cultural). Specifically a new working self is demanded - workers are exhorted to be more flexible, multiskilled and self reflective, with 'flexibility' including a willingness and capacity to take on new identities as they are demanded: such as when there is a corporate takeover or merger or a move from bureaucratic to more entrepreneurial activities, or where there are new technologies and work practices being introduced and so on. Thus in the name of 'learning for

change' workers are invited, encouraged, or otherwise cajoled into a great deal of 'self work' (self examination, self reflection, self monitoring, self regulation).

Arguably the changing nature of education and its interface with the workplace produces, presupposes or otherwise shapes new teacher/learner identities and pedagogical practices, and ultimately what it means to be a 'good' learner or teacher. For example educators have long been concerned with developing the learning skills of students. This is a response to a commonly held view that teachers cannot be expected to teach 'everything', and therefore students need to be given the wherewithal to manage their own learning. It entails the development of a set of generic learning skills, but the skills typically identified are often only applicable to formal learning situations, such as listening, taking notes, summarising, questioning, finding information, organising and categorising thoughts, reviewing material for examinations, exam technique, learning how to generalise/ when to generalise and how to apply theory to practice.

The shift to learning from experience in the workplace requires a reconceptualisation, or perhaps more accurately an additional set of skills and attitudes regarding learning, such as: how to analyse experiences, the ability to learn from others, the ability to act without all the facts available, choosing among multiple courses of action, learning about organisational culture, using a wide range of resources and activities as learning opportunities (eg. memos, policies, decision making processes), and understanding the competing and varied interests in the shaping of one's work or professional identity. Learning from workplace experience also entails the identification and creation of opportunities for experiences from which new learning will flow. This may involve the learner/worker volunteering or seeking out special projects or assignments in the workplace, being active in suggesting initiatives in which he or she may be involved, negotiating with supervisors for more varied tasks and responsibilities, or creating new ways of carrying out routine tasks.

At this point it should be clear that there is a convergence between work-related skills and knowledge, and work-related personal dispositions. Some of the pedagogical implications of this are outlined in the following section.

Implications for pedagogy

The pedagogical expertise of the educator takes on a new significance in the context of workplace learning: it shifts from being a content specialist towards helping learners develop the capacity to learn from their experiences. This is accompanied by the increasing importance and centrality of the 'learner' as opposed to the 'teacher' in the pedagogical process: learners are given more power and responsibility over what they learn and they are crucially seen as *producers* of knowledge. The 'teacher' in these circumstances can take up a number of positions: an arbiter of what constitutes worthy knowledge, a guide who assists learners to 'learn from experience', a measurement specialist who monitors performance, a facilitator who 'processes' the concerns and interests of learners, a commentator or decoder who addresses issues of power and authority, or a manger of learning who ensures that the conditions conducive to learning are present in the workplace.

Following Eraut et al. (2004) it is important to have a conception of the kinds of learning people engage in at work. To this end Eraut et al. developed a typology to guide their research into workplace learning. They used it as a useful heuristic in their research but it can be equally applied to the planning, recording and reviewing the kind of learning expected from work placements. It contains generic descriptors of tasks, skills, capabilities, knowledge and dispositions that can be developed in workplace settings (with the exception of the key skill of reflexivity, to which we will return).

Task Performance	Teamwork	Academic knowledge and skills
Speed and fluency	Collaborative work	Use of evidence and argument

Complexity of tasks and problems	Facilitating social relations	Accessing formal knowledge
Range of skills required	Joint planning and problem	Research-based practice
Communication with a wide range of	solving	Theoretical thinking
people	Ability to engage in and	Knowing what you might need to
Collaborative work	promote mutual learning	know
Awareness and understanding	**Role performance**	Using knowledge resources (human,
Other people: colleagues, customers,	Prioritization	paper-based, electronic)
managers etc	Range of responsibility	Learning how to use relevant theory
Contexts and situations	Supporting other people's	(in a range of practical situations)
One's own organization	learning	**Decisions making and problem**
Problems and risks	Leadership	**solving**
Practices and strategic issues	Accountability	When to seek expert help
Value issues	Supervisory role	Dealing with complexity
Personal development	Delegation	Group decision making
Self evaluation	Handling ethical issues	Problem analysis
Self management	Coping with unexpected	Generating, formulating, and
Handling emotions	problems	evaluating options
Building and sustaining relationships	Crisis management	Managing the process within and
Disposition to attend to other	Keeping up-to-date	appropriate timescale
perspectives		Decision making under pressurized
Disposition to consult and work with		conditions
others		**Judgement**
Disposition to learn and improve		Quality of performance, output and
one's practice		outcomes
Accessing relevant knowledge and		Priorities
expertise		Value issues
Ability to learn from experiences		Levels of risk

Table 1: What is being learned in the workplace? (Eraut et al. 2004a)

With respect to the processes of workplace learning, Eraut (2004) makes the point that workplace environments are only rarely structured with learning in mind and that the majority of learning in the workplace is informal - a combination of learning from other people and personal experience. It is important therefore to identify the kinds of workplace activities that give rise to workplace learning. Eraut identifies four such activities that account for most of the learning: participation in group activities, working alongside others, tackling challenging tasks, and working with clients. Other processes include formal training and the provision of resources such as manuals, reference books etc, mentoring, supervision and coaching, and informal support from peers. The kinds of learning activities embedded in these processes include formal study, listening, observing, reflecting, practising and refining skills, trial and error, problem solving, getting information and asking questions, developing a relationship with a wider network of knowledge resource people, and giving and receiving feedback. Clearly, preparing students for work placements means ensuring they have an understanding of how learning occurs in the workplace and the actions they can take to enhance their learning.

There are of course many ways of describing and analyzing the factors affecting learning in the workplace context. Educators can use these factors to negotiate the nature of the experiences in which the students will be engaged. And they can provide some support for mentors or managers in the workplace. Eraut (2004) focuses on the structure of the work and how this structure affects opportunities for meeting and working alongside people, and whether the work is sufficiently challenging. He elaborates on the issue of the confidence and commitment of the learner:

> confidence arose from successfully meeting challenges in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learning felt supported in that endeavour. Thus there is a triangular relationship between challenge, support and confidence (p269)

It is in this portrayal of confidence that Eraut comes closest to exploring the idea of *how to be* as a contemporary worker – but, unlike others (see Barnett, 2007; Kemmis, 2006)), he stops short of engaging with this issue. This issue of *being* is arguably fundamental to the capacity to learn in new and changing environments, and to read a situation and change as circumstances warrant. Kemmis expresses this as follows:

> wise practitioners stay open-eyed (to changing objective conditions) and open-minded (about changing subjective conditions): they set out to conduct their practice alert to whatever might become salient to their reading of themselves, their understandings and their situations, because these changing perspectives may – perhaps we should say 'almost certainly will' – cause them to change their views about the nature of their initially intended course of action and how things should unfold in this particular case. (2006, p407)

The capacity for reflexivity is clearly the core skill underlying both the development of workplace knowledge and skill, and the development of personal dispositions and ways of being in the workplace. By a 'reflexive engagement with the world' we mean understanding oneself and critically evaluating your 'self', the circumstances in which you live and the way you are positioned in all your relationships – in work, family, institutional and in community life. From a pedagogical point of view this means providing learning experiences that engage students in the uncertainties, messiness and value conflicts of 'real world' problems. This is the great value of work experience and other work-focused learning activities such as portfolio development, reflective journals, work based projects, action research, community based projects and so on. The kinds of work-focused tasks that students now undertake provide the potential for both engagement with the world and for reflecting on and acting upon themselves.

Concluding comments

Work integrated learning programs present many possibilities in delivering on the promise of work ready graduates who can be multi-skilled and adaptable. However the challenge remains for universities to design the programs that reflect the different kinds of skills and knowledge gained from workplace settings. The workplace learning literature discussed in this paper highlights the different kinds of skills and knowledge gained from workplace settings, and points to a need to think differently about learning, especially the idea that learning is not simply 'in the heads' of individual learners, but involves consideration of how learning is formed in social settings and shaped by discourses within the workplace. This led to an examination of the organizational and individual factors that promote learning in the workplace. An important individual disposition is the capacity for adaptation and change in response to changing circumstances. Such a disposition is premised on our ability to reflexively engage with workplace problems and issues, which involves critically reflecting on oneself and a learner and worker. Finally, we have highlighted some pedagogical strategies that can assist learners to gain the knowledge skills and dispositions required for effective engagement with the workplace.

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