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Work and learning: some challenges for practice

The impetus for this chapter is the realisation that changes in the relationship between work and learning force us to look afresh at something we take for granted; that is, our own practice as educators. Unfortunately, it is hard to find a new vantage point on our own practice as commonplace activities simply confirm what we think we already know. The perspective I use here is that of work; the everyday life of workplaces and how we make sense of learning there. I take the view that if we look at educational practice from the standpoint of the contemporary workplace we gain a new perspective on this practice.

The educational agendas of learner-centred approaches, of capability or competency frameworks and increased accountability for public institutions have been the dominant concerns of the past decade or more. These have influenced practice to a great extent and will continue to do so. While there is still much more to be played out in these areas, they are, conceptually at least, mostly agendas of the past. In the twenty-first century I suggest that we are seeing not only the culmination of success of formalising education but also the beginnings of awareness of its limits. This is point-

ing to the need to search for new practices that are responsive to new challenges.

What we are facing is a radically new agenda emerging from an old direction. It is the challenge to learning of work. Not just the new forms of work that it is currently fashionable to celebrate—the new knowledge worker, the information economy and so on—but the old ones also. I hope to demonstrate that these are disturbing our educational view of the world and challenging us to create new forms of practice.

The basic argument of the paper is as follows. Relationships between learning and work are not as we typically assume them to be. In particular, not as they are seen from the perspective of educational institutions and the arrays of qualifications on offer to individual learners. The conventional separation of learning and work is breaking down. Our practice as educators is grounded at a very deep level in a set of assumptions about the separateness of learning and work. Our practice has been dependent on this separation. Our educational institutions are separated physically and conceptually from the points of application of learning and we need to find ways of bridging this gap. We conventionally see learning in work and learning at work through the perceptual lens of educators. This highlights some features and leaves others hidden. Processes of learning at work are ignored. Formally documented learning is privileged over that which “merely” influences the quality of our work. New learning practices in workplaces (and sometimes what always has been going on there) are challenging us, individually and institutionally. We need to look at practice in a thorough-going way to see what are the implications for our practice.

This paper first examines the relationships between learning and work over time to show how they have changed, and are changing now. This provides a broad background to what follows. Second, the paper considers two recent examples of my own involvement in learning and work to see what they tell us about our concerns. One considers a radical, but accredited program that attempts to build new kinds of involvement between universities and

work organisations. The other is quite the opposite. It focuses on a study of everyday learning in workplaces, seen afresh. Thirdly, the paper looks at the implications of these studies for what is being termed “the new learning practitioner” (Chappell 2001) and for the new kinds of practice that are needed.

The central theme is that by directing our gaze at the practices of work, and by not trying to force them into a conventional educational view of the world, we can allow this challenge to disturb and renew our own practices. Of course, the “we” of this is problematic. Much of what occurs in educational institutions will remain untouched. But what we do at the interface between educational institutions and workplaces will change substantially and there will be even more changes in practices in work involving new kinds of practitioner.

The dominance of an educational perspective

The world of education has progressively colonised the worlds of work, life and the community. One of the current manifestations of this is through the discourse of lifelong learning. The idea of “learning” as a conscious, systematic act has been taken and applied everywhere. The notion of experiential learning, for example, has moved from the voluntary learning group into the formalism of recognition of prior learning and mandatory staff development strategies in workplaces. This has been an important and powerful trend that has provided many opportunities for individuals and groups to make sense of what they do and to operate more effectively. However, in the process we have not been aware of the implications of rendering all activities part of learning. The view has been taken that what we are doing is an unambiguously “good” thing which only has positive consequences. Learning must be taken everywhere; we must bring the enlightenment of learning to all the dark places of organisations. The processes of formalising

the informal through, for example, the recognition of prior learning, or of turning companies into learning companies or expecting all knowledge and skill acquisition to be accredited are examples of the colonisation of learning throughout all institutions in society.

Learning is seen as a solution to many problems. Of course, it may be. However, this apparent arrogance of the educator blinds us to the limitations of an educational perspective. While we may see the act of rendering everything as learning as a positive, others see it as a process of infantilising, of positioning themselves as inadequate, as a person lacking in what is necessary to be competent at what they do. The discourse of learning, as they perceive it, sends them back to the world of the classroom. For some this has oppressive and negative connotations, for others it is a world of stability and simplicity, of right and wrong. It may not be the liberating context that we ourselves may have experienced or that we are trying to promote.

If we look anew at the world of work we find that it is no longer what it once was, or rather was once thought to be. It is not solely an activity we engage in to earn income to enable us to fulfil ourselves outside work. Indeed, much work is not paid work. Work creates identity. We spend a very large part of our waking lives engaged in it. It is a key part of social activity. It is something we spend far longer thinking about than the normal working day. It permeates us and we identify with it. This has always perhaps been true for those who work in the professions, but now this pervades all forms of work from the professions through “emotional labour” to all the jobs that are no longer closely supervised.

As discussed later, there is an alternative world of learning occurring in workplaces and the community. This world does not use the word learning, and when it does it does not do so in the same ways as educators use it. It has always been there and it represents by far the largest part of the totality of “learning” that we experience. It is all the knowledge and skill acquisition that we engage it to do our jobs. This is not an argument against the idea of

learning, but one which cautions that the formalisation of all learning into forms which are accredited or require the intervention of educators is a trend which cannot continue for ever.

Separation and integration of work and learning

Before the spread of schools and vocational training organisations, learning and work were inseparable. See Table 1. It simply wasn't meaningful to distinguish the two. Living, working and learning were all of one piece. People learned directly from others who had knowledge. As Lave and Wenger (1991) has it, “legitimate peripheral participation” was all there was.

Table 1. Links between work and learning

Era 1	Pre-modern	Inseparable
Era 2	Modern	Largely separate
Era 3	Post-modern	Integrated and separate

As guilds and schools developed, there was progressive differentiation between work and learning until the late modern era in which there are no occupations without extensive periods of non-vocational education and few that do not involve pre-vocational learning before employment. A general education is the sine qua non; it is unquestionable even today.

In late modernity we see now a fragmentation of arrangements. While general education is a foundation for everything, learning and work after post-compulsory education takes many different forms. It is not just focused on the individual, but on building organisations, teams and work processes (eg. Järvinen & Poikela 2001). There are many examples of separation, as in much training for the professions, but also increasing examples of integrating models from new kinds of apprenticeships to work-based

learning, organisational development and so on. Ellström (2001) has identified a number of factors that foster or inhibit and integration of learning and work.

These changes can be identified over different stages of the changing relationship between work and learning. See Table 2.

Table 2. Changing relationships between work and learningStage

1.	Work is learningStage
2.	Learning for its own sakeStage
3.	Learning occurs for workStage
4.	Work and learning interact on many levels

There were major transitions from learning occurring through work before the rise of the school in the middle ages to the tradition of classical education in which application of learning in work was regarded as not a concern. Learning then needed no practical justification; it was an intrinsic good. Some vocational preparation occurred in the early universities but inevitably, the vast majority of the population was excluded by virtue of religion, gender or breeding. This changed over the modern period to the position we have now with increasing rhetoric of governments that justifies education in terms of vocational relevance.

Setting aside the rhetoric, there are now multiple interactions. Increasingly full-time students in upper high school and in post-secondary education have paid work; most entry-level positions involve simultaneous study. Advancement is through work-related learning whether accredited or not and in the lean, de-layered organisations of today all work groups need to learn all the time to get the job done. There are also times in which there is no paid work and the absence of work itself creates challenges for learning both when work is desired and when it is not.

Nevertheless, we are seeing a strengthening period of reconciliation between work and learning. However, it is not yet clear what forms this reconciliation will take, and in particular what the place will be for learning practitioners within it. What is clear though is that it is extremely unlikely that there will be a singular educational role and we will see a divergence of practice among different kinds of learning practitioner.

Taking the latter stages of these developments, we can see recent trends. Firstly, a move to locate what was previously undertaken within educational institutions in workplaces. The most obvious example of this at present is the major shift towards workplace assessment of competencies, by staff of the employer organisation away from teachers. In Australia, at least, workplace assessment by trained employees is becoming the norm for VET qualifications. Assessment of competence is made by those fully immersed in the culture of the workplace.

Secondly, often quite separate from the formal assessment frameworks of occupational competency that drive vocational qualifications, are the great variety of internal learning activities that are undertaken under various guises, both individual and collective. Learning in work has been increasingly systematised. Notions of corporate competencies, performance management plans that include specific learning goals, the use of in-house programs and organisational development have all foregrounded learning. Some enterprises have gone so far as to aspire to the status of learning organisations based upon the rationale that the new competitive advantage is the ability to learn and respond more quickly than other organisations. While such an emphasis on learning has not touched all parts of the workforce and many workers continue to be employed in firms with unreformed work practices, nevertheless there has been a shift in the direction of acknowledging the importance of learning throughout the economy.

There is a small amount of interaction between the two worlds, but not much as might be expected from the vast magnitude of each. Organisations often avoid using educational institu-

tions to assist them in their own learning in work and there has been an explosion of consultancy organisations, both small and large, that service this need.

Case studies

Moving from the larger frame we can focus on two specific sites of interest. The first is the phenomenon of work-based learning partnerships. These have grown in the UK and Australia to become a part of higher education that most directly challenges what we mean by a university education. They involve study for formal qualifications that occurs alongside work in workplaces by existing employees. They are not part-time study in which people leave work to study in their own time and pursue their own interests, or conventional qualifications conducted within organisations, like the in-house MBA favoured by some multi-nationals, but a new form of educational practice altogether.

The second involves everyday learning in what might be called "normal" workplaces (Boud and Middleton 2003). Of course, nothing can be regarded as a normal workplace, but these workplaces were selected not on the basis of the especially interesting learning that was occurring, but because there were no particular innovations or interventions related to learning at work.

The second case also provides a useful contrast with the first as our research shows as it is often untypical organisations that take up the challenges of work-based learning partnerships, at least in the current early stages of development of them.

1. Work-based learning partnerships

Work-based learning partnerships have emerged over the past ten years as new forms of relationships between organisations and universities (Boud and Solomon 2001; Järvinen & Poikela 2003). They are designed to meet the learning needs of organisations and

employees not through study of a university designed curriculum, but through negotiated learning activities that aim to meet the needs of each of the parties.

In these, existing employees are enrolled as university students but remain based in their own workplace. They study not the pre-determined curriculum devised by the university, but construct a program of their own in which their work is the curriculum. Students involved in work-based learning partnerships may take some units from the standard offering, but they pursue learning plans that they devise and which are supported by their employer and enacted at work.

Learning is typically transdisciplinary and focuses on equipping learners to contribute to the future development of the organisation, not acquisition of knowledge and skills required for their present position. It is not a new form of training, but an education located in work. Programs start with the identification of current competencies, what a learner wants to pursue and the development of a learning plan to get them there. At all stages support is provided from the employing organisation as well as the university.

Issues arising

Work-based learning partnerships are not an alternative to other forms of higher education; they fill a significant gap in the existing repertoire. They are such a challenge to existing practice that we are just starting to understand how they can be conducted well.

Some of the issues that have arisen and are relevant to the current theme are as follows. How can the tension of being both a worker and a learner be managed without the conventional forms of separation of identity? How can universities judge knowledge as legitimate when they are not involved in its codification (a key feature of transdisciplinary knowledge)? And, is it possible to cope with the different timescale pressures from the workplace (short-term work) and the educational institution (long-term learning)?

These raise questions for educational practice, such as the changing relationship between adviser and learner when the "teacher" is necessarily not a subject-matter expert, and the difficulty of finding an appropriate and legitimate role for the educator in such conditions.

The reaction of some colleagues is to despair and say that can't get involved in something as problematic as this. Others suggest that there is no alternative but to engage with such challenges if universities are not to be rendered irrelevant to the world of work in which they exist.

2. *Uncovering learning at work*

The second case is not one in which educators are confronted with dealing with a new situation, but one in which they are absent. In a study at the University of Technology, Sydney, we have been studying four very different workgroups within one large organisation to look at everyday learning (Boud and Middleton 2003). The project is titled "uncovering learning at work". It seeks to examine learning in a range of intact work groups when there is no formal learning intervention being introduced from outside the group. The focus is on everyday learning. That is, learning not prompted by educational initiatives, staff development opportunities or any other explicitly learning process. We have found that learning is inextricably intertwined with work.

We entered the project with the expectation that uncovering learning in workplaces, making it visible and rendering it accessible to organisational intervention was a desirable educational outcome. This was not a view which we held alone, but one shared in public policy initiatives in many Western societies as well as our own. *Making Learning Visible* was one of the catchcries in many places (cf. the European Union, Bjørnåvold 2000) and is often seen as desirable by researchers (eg. Järvinen 1998). Our experience in these workgroups made us question whether such visibility fitted well with the cultural practices of work.

Issues arising

What we identified from these studies is that in these workgroups learning is intrinsic to work. It takes place all the time, in the tea room, in conversations when traveling home, whether it is sanctioned as part of work or not. Working knowledge (Symes and McIntyre 2000) and the knowledge resources of organisations (Järvinen 1999) are highly valued. "Spaces" for learning are informally created and re-created. Lunch rooms, places for tea-making provide a separate space, driving home together after work. However, it is seldom named or acknowledged as learning. A comment typical of what we found is "learning is what happens on courses or in the classroom, not what we do here". There was no resistance to us labeling things as learning, but we gained the impression that to do so was regarded as a bit of an affectation of researchers.

We started our first set of interviews with group members asking about things that would point to the learning happening in the groups, but we avoided using the "learning" word (Boud and Solomon 2003). This elicited a rich and extensive array of learning activities in all the groups. Learning to cope with changes in technology, with work processes, with restructuring, with new products and so on. However, when we introduced the "learning" word, the range of examples dramatically decreased. Examples were given of staff development meetings or training courses, but little else. Lots of learning was occurring, but was not recognised as such.

However, while learning was not actually rejected, identity as a learner was! The metaphor mentioned in dependently in two of the groups was that of the "L" plate driver. The workers did not want to be seen as a learner in the workplace. This was not compatible with an identity as a competent worker. We were not dealing with groups in which there were significant numbers of new staff, so we don't know if this label would have been more acceptable to novices.

What does this tell us about learning and work?

If we take these two examples together, what do they reveal? Firstly, although educators are supposed to be the experts on learning, most learning at work is unavailable. Not only is it not readily accessible, more disturbingly, our discourse renders much of it invisible. It is not separated from normal processes. It is not documented as such. The language used is highly contextualised.

Secondly, not only is it not available to us, it is often not organisationally legitimised either. We were told the story of a staff development day which was reported as a waste of time – this was referring to the formal organisationally sanctioned agenda – but simultaneously was regarded as an extremely valuable means of networking with colleagues in other parts of the organisation. This networking was intensely job-related, just not part of the current strategic plan.

We learned that we should be more modest when thinking about formal educational interventions. Part of our original project plan was to follow a round of analysis of work groups with some formal interventions to enhance learning. We soon discovered that most of the kinds of intervention educational practitioners make in such circumstances would have done more to disrupt and undermine knowledge development and informal learning networks than foster them.

Finally, we discovered that much learning is driven by work place performativity expectations. That is, what is needed to “get the job done” and cope with the problems that arise in doing it. Learning linked to that had far greater legitimacy and was given higher priority than anything else. This was a finding that also applied to us as a research team (Solomon et al 2001).

In reflecting on this recent experience, I have started to question some of the things I have taken-for-granted over many years. These include the role of educators, as teacher, adult educator, facilitator or whatever term is used. I have also begun to question the dominant discourse which renders all learning visible, whether

in the form of recognition of prior learning or competency demonstration. We are seeing the emergence of a new range of roles within organisations that we might collectively identify as learning practitioners. These include not only those who might have a formally designated role with regard to fostering the learning of others but all those who create or write agendas that directly influences learning and how it is perceived. New forms of practice are not only being enacted by the new learning practitioners, but the old learning practitioners like ourselves need to look for new forms of practice which take account of the perspective's of workplaces.

The new learning practitioner

Practitioners who have little or no formal background in teaching and training are now using “learning” in organisations. While all members of an organisation might be learners, it is those designated as learning practitioners who legitimise and give voice to what is defined as learning.

Learning practitioners have diverse identities and are found in a variety of locations. They typically include a variety of senior managers and those involved in any organisational change process (eg. quality management, process redesign, systems implementation etc.), but almost any manager or team leader now has a role in fostering learning. However, some roles are combined only with difficulty with that of learning practitioner. A particularly troubling one is that of supervisor (or line-manager) and learning facilitator. This is difficult because there are suggestions that one of the last people a worker is likely to reveal their real learning needs to is their boss (Hughes 2004). They need to portray themselves as competent workers, not as incompetent learners.

Given the varieties of learning practitioner, there is no single set of practices that apply across all types. At one level of analysis, all workers are responsible for promoting learning by their peers and by themselves. Informally, this is often well accepted. However, resistance can occur when attempts are made to formalise this.

Workers readily accept responsibility for helping others learn. They have always done this. However, they may not want to be formally given such a responsibility, as this would be seen as taking on an additional burden for which they would be accountable. At another level of analysis all managers, especially those involved with change are key practitioners in promoting (and inhibiting) learning. Again, they may resist formal responsibility, but they are often expected to take it.

Finally, there are those whose position gives them explicit responsibility for "learning". These people may only rarely see themselves as trainers or facilitators as they may see such functions as much lower-level functions. They are promoting learning nonetheless. This group has not been researched and we are hoping to study them next.

Some elements of practice

If we look specifically at those that have a more directly educational role in the intersection of learning and work we can identify some features. These are people who may be based within or outside the workplace and who may or may not have a link with an educational institution. Some may have relatively low level roles in organisations; for example, those trained as workplace assessors. Others may be senior managers leading significant changes. Their experience and organisational location are not necessarily conducive to promoting learning.

For the sake of the present discussion it useful to focus on two categories of practice: that which is identified explicitly as promoting learning, and that which may strongly influence learning, but is framed in terms of other kinds of organisational practice. Focusing on that sub-set that manifestly focuses on individual worker-learners, as well as having an organisational role we can start to see some features of new practice.

In 2002 I undertook an exercise with various work-based learning practitioners in universities with the aim of identifying

what it was that they required to be effective, both conceptually and practically. The group had direct experience of working with students in major work-based learning partnerships. My interest was to determine how different were the features of this kind of work relative to say, supervising college-based students in placements or research-degree students.

While a few features are shared between work-based learning advising and student supervision, what is striking is the different emphasis of the list. There are some categories where there is overlap, for example, with regard to learning consultancy and negotiating independent studies, and enquiry and research supervision, but most are distinct. It is this discontinuity which creates tensions for educational practice.

If we focus on those who have a specifically educational role with regard to learning and work, what might be the new elements of practice? The list below is drawn from a series of workshops with work-based learning advisers in Australia and the UK. It both draws on their emerging practice and attempts to draw it together under key themes.

Some constituents of the conceptual knowledge and skill base of work-based learning practitioners are as follows:

➤ *Learning consultancy*

Educational consulting and supervision skills, including negotiating learning, fostering forms of support for worker-learners and demystification of academic discourses.

➤ *Work and context*

Refers to not only understanding the culture and politics of workplaces, but being able to locate learning in the environments which actually are faced by worker-learners.

➤ *Transdisciplinarity*

Being able to operate in knowledge environments in which disciplinary and professional knowledge is not dominant. This includes helping learners with the identification of appropriate communities of practice and drawing knowledge from experience.

➤ *Enquiry*

The cluster of methods and methodologies that can be used for learning projects in work.

➤ *Reflexivity and reviewing*

Refers not only to educator's reflexivity in learning but in helping others identify what constitutes good practice and find ways of judging their achievements and in documenting learning outcomes.

It is interesting to note what was absent as much as what was present in what practitioners regarded as important. There was little emphasis on teaching or training, particular subject-matter knowledge and being an assessor, though for some the latter may be a separate role. There was a very strong emphasis on knowledge brokerage, on assisting others to plan and monitor and generally on promoting learning how to learn.

Conclusion

Our practice has been disturbed by the new (and old) challenges of work, we cannot pretend otherwise. New practitioners have emerged, but many do not identify with educational agendas and values. This has the potential to fragment or renew the profession of education and training. Looking back from the future we may see the end of the twentieth century as a time when the march of formalisation of education and training had reached a peak. The practices of educators had been extended into many new domains and we were anticipating a new world of lifelong learning characterised by systematic, interlocking, accredited programs which were quality assured, delivered in conjunction with new technologies and linking to local support networks. My view is that while there is still momentum behind this march, we may need to be looking in different directions.

We need to ask questions now such as, how is it that people actually learn in real settings? And, how can learning be promoted everywhere? The answers may not be the ones expected. It may not involve more recognition of prior learning, more courses or more web-based programs. It will probably be a more reflexive development in which the major learning intervention involves noticing what we are doing, what gets in the way of doing it better and how we do it in congenial ways with those we interact with.

This has been called informal learning, but that term undervalues the most important learning of all. The new challenge to practice is to find ways of acknowledging how we and others learn in our many locations and build on that without the act of formalising learning destroying what we are trying to foster.

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