# Negotiated work-based learning: from delivery systems to realisation systems

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*Capability* volume 5 no 1, pp 6-9 (2002)

**Abstract**

Negotiated work-based learning (NWBL) allows practitioner-learners to create individual programmes based on work activities and projects, and have them approved for the award of a university qualification. Evidence to date suggests that NWBL is opening up new opportunities for partnerships between universities, organisations and individuals. If the potential inherent in this non-traditional approach to higher education is to be realised, significant changes are needed to many of the assumptions and structures present in institutions. At the broadest level, this can be conceptualised as a move from 'delivery systems' geared to providing standard products and services to student-consumers, to 'realisation systems' which engage with the individual and often indeterminate needs of practitioner-learners.

## Introduction

Negotiated work-based learning (NWBL) is an approach to work-based development pioneered by several universities in the UK, among them Leeds and Leeds Metropolitan Universities (Stephenson 1998a, Foster 1996), and Middlesex University (Osborne *et al* 1998), the first institution to apply a NWBL approach at doctoral level (Doncaster 2000). Over 20% of UK higher education institutions are now involved at least to a limited extent in this kind of work-based learning, and Ufi Ltd (Learndirect, the 'University for Industry') has recently developed its Learning through Work scheme to expand access to NWBL and provide on-line support for learners.

The basic principle of NWBL is that it allows learners to create award-bearing or credit-rated programmes around agendas set by their work, organisations, career aspirations or personal interests, with the primary mode of learning being action-based - typically centred on activities and projects that form part of the learners' work. Negotiated work-based learning differs from modular schemes in that instead of assembling programmes from pre-existing components, learners are involved in creating pathways that draw chiefly on experiential sources of learning, backed by independent investigation, tutor support and other activities (including where relevant courses and distance packages) as appropriate in each case. Significantly, NWBL programmes are neither taught nor research-based in the traditional sense; although they are likely to involve practical research and often include some content-based components, their principal focus is on development, practice and action.

The experiences of institutions that support negotiated work-based learning indicate that NWBL is a growing part of higher education. While the NWBL approach can be used in

early-career applications such as sandwich placements and graduate apprenticeships, its greatest potential appears to lie in providing experienced practitioners with individual, focused and highly relevant means for pursuing career goals, undertaking ongoing professional development, and engaging with business or organisational issues. Organisations are also finding that NWBL can offer greater flexibility and focus than more traditional in-service or executive programmes, while promoting forms of learning that engage directly with practice requirements and relevant issues. Further, NWBL offers potential for universities and colleges of higher education to engage with sectors where they have traditionally had limited involvement, such as small enterprises and the voluntary sector.

**Beyond delivery**

In some respects NWBL represents an emerging paradigm within higher education, which while both practically and intellectually rigorous is neither academic in the traditional sense, nor vocational in the narrow sense of preparing students for specific careers or jobs. While NWBL programmes are typically operated from a fairly eclectic base, several traditions can be identified on which they draw. These include the adult education thinking of Dewey (1938) and Knowles (1970); work on experiential learning such as that of Kolb (1984) and Argyris and Schön (1978); the reflective practitioner philosophy of Schön (1983, 1987); the idea of action learning as propounded by Revans (1980) and its subsequent exponents (e.g. McGill & Beatty 1992); various traditions of action research, both as applied to professional development (e.g. Carr & Kemmis 1986) and wider systems (e.g. Checkland 1981); and recent thinking on self-directed learning, both in higher education (e.g. Stephenson 1998b, Boud *et al* 1993, Evans 1992) and industry (e.g. Cunningham 1994).

One of the problems associated with the emergence and introduction of new paradigms is that they can be slow to gain acceptance; meet with considerable resistance; and be forced to exist on the fringe until they gather sufficient support to replace or complement older ideas. According to Kuhn (1970), the process of paradigmatic change in science typically involves gradual growth of the new paradigm against scepticism and opposition, until a point where a critical mass is reached and it overturns the old, in turn becoming the new 'normal science.' Kuhn himself acknowledged that this was an oversimplified description, and in social arenas the process is considerably more complex due to the more open-ended and divergent nature of the issues involved, with a tendency for paradigms to co-exist in eclectic or uneasy parallel.

The philosophies and practices of negotiated work-based learning bring it into conflict with a number of assumptions and practices which when taken together might be accorded the status of a dominant paradigm of higher education. This is important at a practical level, as identifying NWBL as being outside of the accepted way of doing things can lead to its marginalisation, and in turn to under-resourcing and lost opportunities. The main ones are:

- Assumptions about the ownership of knowledge. Traditionally, academic and professional communities have codified what they regard as academically valid knowledge. This has led to knowledge being regarded as the 'property' of academic and professional institutions, with one of the most important functions of the university being to research, codify and disseminate knowledge (see for instance Schön 1983). This is reflected in a set of practices

where faculty staff are organised as subject experts who define the content of programmes and curricula, as well as the criteria against which successful performance is judged - traditionally through reference to the knowledge-base, in more recent practice through the use of predefined learning objectives or (projected) outcomes. If not actually symptomatic of a permeating positivistic or structuralist view of knowledge, these practices reveal a reluctance to accept that knowledge is created situationally by individual learners and that legitimate tests of validity are provided through practice and results.

- Assumptions about the nature of work (i.e. study) appropriate to a university. In most areas of higher education the main concerns are with gaining knowledge and developing understanding, and with evaluation, research and critique. In itself this is no problem, and as Barnett (1997) argues more attention could be given to developing powers of critique and 'critical being', but they represent only part of what high-level thinking and action are about. Typically, there is little reference to creativity, using intelligent intuition, and creating action that is effective, strategic or innovative (see for instance the descriptors for the various higher education levels published by the Quality Assurance Agency [2001] or the Inter-Consortium Credit Agreement [1998]). It is far from sufficient to sideline the question of creative action by assuming it stems from well-developed powers of evaluation and critique.

- Assumptions about how learners engage with higher education. The dominant assumption is that people 'enter' institutions (whether physically or through distance or on-line means), and become students of that institution who study something there. The problem in this is that it creates an expectation by the institution that learners are signing up to a range of peripheral procedures, rules and ways of operating, with an expectation that they become inducted into a higher education operating environment with its particular sets of expectations, assumptions and peculiarities.

In many respects mainstream higher education practice constitutes a classic 'delivery system' (Schiff 1970), where knowledge and power rest with the professional or expert, who is able to make decisions on the client's behalf and 'deliver' solutions according to his or her perceptions of client need. Although Schiff's idea of delivery systems was developed in the context of professional-client relationships, it is equally applicable to educational contexts where the power to define what is provided and on what terms rests firmly with the institution. Recent trends, influenced by various manifestations of government policy, has been towards more accountability on the part of institutions, and to limited movement of power from institution to student via a form of regulated market mechanism. This can be conceptualised as a modified delivery system, moving from a traditional professional-client relationship to one of producer-consumer; it can be viewed as part of the wider move in the 1980s and 1990s to subject professional services to market forces and external regulation (see for instance Broadbent *et al* 1997).

While in some respects a market-oriented environment may be more conducive to the kind of innovations and approaches needed to foster NWBL, movement to a producer-consumer relationship (cf. the so-called 'Macdonaldisation' of higher education) is likely to be more hostile. Negotiated work-based learning revolves around bespoke applications rather than the

delivery of standard products to a consumer market, and requires a different approach to that of the delivery system: while the work-based learner is contractually a client of the institution, the psychological contract involves a measure of collaboration and partnership as well as service provision.

**From delivery to realisation**

In his discussion of professional practice Schiff advocates a move from the delivery approach to what he terms a 'realisation system' (see table 1). This involves the professional working with the client in a facilitative or developmental role to create outcomes for which the client has ownership, and that are typically individual. In this relationship meaning and value become located with the client; the professional still provides expert advice and guidance, but in a context of partnership rather than service delivery. Critically, realisation systems involve a qualitatively different kind of relationship to delivery systems; rather than representing merely a shift of power from provider to consumer, they require collaborative ways of working and a sense of the professional becoming involved in the client's 'space.' In the terms used by Schön (1987), this involves the professional in moving from the 'hard, high ground' of technical rationality to the 'swampy lowland' with its need for a more reflective, intuitive and adaptable mode of working.

**Table 1. From delivery to realisation**

| *model:* | **Delivery** (expert) | **Delivery** (consumer) | **Realisation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *basis*: | trust | contractual | partnership |
| *relationship*: | expert - layperson | producer - consumer | collegial |
| *power*: | provider | producer, consumer, regulator | shared |
| *nature*: | service provided in interests of client | service provided to meet consumer needs | shared endeavour |
| *emphasis*: | expertise, judgement | quality, standards, specifications | solutions, ways forward |

If the delivery system, whether in its traditional or consumerist form, represents the current paradigm or normal science of higher education, the relationships necessary to support negotiated work-based learning fit more closely with Schiff's description of a realisation system. Relating this to institutional practices, it points to moving far beyond the notion of student as a customer, and suggests a number of changes that need to be made to basic assumptions and practices. In brief, these will include:

- Accepting that the starting-point for development is the practitioner-learner rather than a predefined notion of curriculum. While the usual (though not essential) linkage of NWBL programmes to qualifications and credit means that some basic rules need to be applied to the programme, these become rules of principle rather than rules of detail: for example, while a degree programme needs to be coherent and demonstrably at degree level, this becomes coherent in terms of the learner's agenda and degree-level in terms of the thinking and action involved, rather than in terms of a predefined notion of what a degree should contain.

- Moving from institutional ownership of knowledge to a view of knowledge where it relates to a purpose owned by the learner and based in his or her context. A more constructivist or phenomenological approach becomes necessary, with the emphasis on knowing as personal, situational and dynamic, rather than knowledge as institutional, codified and static.

- Linked to this, moving from precedent-based forms of validation to ones that are purposive. This means that the primary measure of validity moves from what is expected according to conventional wisdom and codified knowledge, to what is effective and appropriate in the context in which it is based. The primary criteria for validity become fitness for purpose (pragmatic) and fitness of purpose (systemic). This has important implications for assessment, in that it needs to operate from the learner's context and answer two types of question: one concerned with whether what is put forward makes sense, works, and is consistent with the wider context, ethics and so forth of practice, and the other concerned with the level of thinking and action being deployed.

- Finally, there are implications for how NWBL learners are viewed: less as students who study 'in' the institution and more as practitioners who are learning from and through their practice, in dialogue with the university. This means moving away from assumptions that learners need to be inducted into all the systems and procedures of higher education, and towards transparent systems where institutional requirements are fitted around the needs of the learner.

At an individual level this represents a much less determinate way of operating, in which tutors need to develop empathy with learners' contexts and perspectives and appreciate what they are aiming to achieve as a practical endeavour rather than as a primarily academic one. Because each learner will have a different agenda and set of circumstances, and the rules of engagement are now at least partially set by the learner, this involves an approach which is much more like a consultancy or mentoring relationship than one of lecturing or tutoring on a predesigned programme.

At an institutional level there are some obvious challenges in terms of what is being offered and how it is marketed or explained. In one sense the standard product offering - higher education qualifications - is likely to remain a principal selling-point, but thinking is needed that moves beyond means of offering qualifications to providing services that are intrinsically valuable. This is particularly important if NWBL is to be a means of expanding the higher education market and the social and economic role of universities, beyond providing a niche route to gaining degrees and diplomas. While the market for credentials is unlikely to contract in the near future, the question also needs to be asked of what added value NWBL can offer to the practitioner or organisation for whom qualifications are not a concern: what is it that is being realised? Many of these things will be immediately practical and connect with the agenda of the practitioner or that of his or her community of practice, and they will also include process support and access to resources, expertise and other practitioners from beyond the immediate practice context. In many situations they will also be concerned with raising the level of thinking and action to be more strategic, critical and creative, to include greater

cognisance of the wider context of practice, and to develop ongoing abilities to learn through practice.

More generally, the realisation paradigm points to ways in which universities can engage with their communities and markets through NWBL and other media in a way that is directly practical, but does not become dominated by short-term commercial or political expediency. While the delivery model is tolerably effective for imparting basic skills and knowledge, it is not good at assisting people to develop mature capability (Lester & Chapman 2001), wisdom (Sternberg 1998), or the skills of 'symbolic analysis' that are increasingly needed in post-industrial economies (Reich 1991).

**Modifying institutional systems architecture**

Moving to a new paradigm and associated way of operating will require modifications to institutions' 'systems architecture.' The architecture or deep structure of a soft system such as higher education is made up of interactions between principles, procedures, culture and artefacts that influence how the system works regardless of individual initiatives within it. Some idea of an institution's systems architecture can be gleaned from places such as policies on curriculum, modularisation and assessment, quality manuals, student handbooks and codes of practice, although more important is how these things influence what happens in practice. A good test of systems boundaries in this sense is to consider how far initiatives can be taken without returning to the status quo once development effort is removed. Clearly, systems are not static, but at any given time there will be limits beyond which practices or initiatives are either effectively opposed, or require continuing effort to sustain them.

The development of new practices, particularly initiatives such as NWBL that represent variance from the mainstream of practice, are typically pursued in one of two ways: either to set up a project team or unit to take forward the development, or to create informal pockets or networks to generate change according to the opportunities available and enthusiasm of the people involved. Both may be successful strategies, but unless the organisational systems architecture becomes modified to accommodate them they are likely to remain vulnerable, in the first case through marginalisation, and in the second through dissipating once the initial enthusiasm and resources are spent (the danger also exists of informal initiatives attracting attention as they become more successful, and running into the dynamic conservatism inherent in semi-stable systems; see for instance O'Reilly 1993).

Two institutional strategies might be distinguished in which NWBL is able to develop successfully. One that is debatably beginning to appear in some of the leading universities involved in work-based learning is for the principles and practices of NWBL to become accepted as a subsystem within the main organisational architecture. In this scenario the practices of NWBL are accepted as different to those of mainstream activities, but this is viewed as proper to operating in the relevant niche. The test that this has occurred is first that NWBL evolves beyond compromise with the rest of the institutional system into a genuine realisation system, and secondly that it does not depend for its sustainability on the presence of individual champions (whether within the NWBL unit or in the university's overall management). The second, currently unrealised strategy, is for the institution as a whole to

effect systems change to support a realisation approach. While in the present operating environment this may appear too daunting and impractical a task to contemplate, it is arguably in keeping with the kind of educational or developmental experiences appropriate to the needs of the emerging 'information society' (cf Reich 1991).

Outside the institution, there is also likely to be a role for networks concerned with NWBL in raising the level of discussion so that it contributes to an emergent extra-institutional systems architecture that enables forward development. Opportunities in this direction might exist via the Universities' Association for Continuing Education work-based learning network or through the Learndirect Learning through Work programme. For this to be effective it will require a willingness to engage with structural and philosophical issues relating to work-based learning, as well as engagement with, rather than simply discussion about, external influences such as funding and quality regimes and government policy.

## Conclusion

Discussion of paradigmatic change and systems architecture may appear theoretical or secondary to practitioners involved at the sharp end of negotiated work-based learning. However, it is only through changes at systems level that the potential offered by this form of higher education can be fully realised. To give just one example, developing work-based higher education so that it engages with the needs of small firms and voluntary networks requires a substantially different approach to the one provided by the delivery paradigm, and that requires in turn acceptance of different institutional philosophies and approaches. Making these kinds of changes possible requires a willingness on the part of institutions, and their staff, to critically examine the systems they operate and work within, and be prepared to change the key organisational artefacts - the 'systems levers' - that influence practice within the institution.

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