

Reconsidering negotiated work-based learning in the digital age

Dr Stan Lester

Stan Lester Developments, Somerset, UK

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The introduction and expansion of Degree Apprenticeships, and higher-level apprenticeships more generally, has had a positive effect on widening access to professional and organisational careers as well as in some fields to progression within professions (Lester & Bravenboer 2020; Lillis & Bravenboer 2022). However, as discussed by Talbot *et al* (2019) this has been accompanied by a decrease in employer- and individually-negotiated programmes. The reduction in negotiated work-based learning (NWBL) opportunities and decline in heutagogically-based higher education raises questions about what opportunities have been closed down, for whom, and how these might be revisited.

The development of NWBL in the 1990s and 2000s was fairly well-studied (e.g. Duckenfield & Stirner 1992, Stephenson & Saxton 2005, Lester & Costley 2010). These studies indicated that the main client groups for NWBL were typically different from those traditionally associated with either full-time higher education or apprenticeships. Learners were typically adults with substantial work experience (if sometimes in insecure or marginal work), sometimes self-employed, and whose ambitions were often more associated with development within a broad role, business or organisational development, or following an individual career than formal progression into or within a profession or occupation. The need for individual or firm-specific learning is also supported by more economically-focussed studies such as Burgoyne *et al* (2004) for managers in small firms. While there has been some use of apprenticeships to fill these gaps, the research quoted suggests that programmes based in preset standards and curricula are unlikely to be a good substitute for those in which the focus is negotiated and individually or locally driven. On balance there are areas such as progression from assistant-type to professional roles (e.g. teaching assistant to teacher, healthcare assistant to nurse or physiotherapist) where apprenticeships have more to offer, and others such as general management or technical development programmes where they may be able to act as substitutes depending on the level of flexibility needed.

NWBL can be regarded as a 'disturbing practice' compared with traditional full- and part-time degree courses (Boud 2001), and it necessitates a 'realisation' or facilitative rather than a 'delivery' approach (Lester 2002). A barrier to its sustainability is the cost associated with negotiation and support for individual learning. Early attempts at using digital means to streamline some of this – most notably the Ufi-Learndirect *Learning through Work* initiative 20 years ago – were only partly successful, and focussed on developing a programme outline and learning agreement rather than supporting the later stages of the programme. Advances in digital technology and in its accessibility, and its widespread (if not always well-executed) use for online learning during the coronavirus pandemic (e.g. Lester & Crawford-Lee 2022), suggest a way forward. There appears to be potential to use 'intelligent' and accessible digital platforms to provide a number of benefits including:

- Making online-mediated NWBL more inclusive by using universal design principles (e.g. Burgstahler 2021) and by considering accessibility issues in relation to learners personally and to their (workplace and home) learning environments.
- Making NWBL more cost-effective by the wider use of digital learning communities, online tutor meetings and digital resource networks. These factors may also improve accessibility for some learners, though for others a lack of face-to-face contact can be a barrier.
- Expanding learning-from-work opportunities beyond those provided by a physical workplace, for instance through distant projects, collaboration and consultancy.
- Further integrating academic and workplace learning, both through online means and through the use of other digital technologies such as augmented and mixed reality.

Advances in artificial intelligence, particularly intelligent tutoring systems (Schiff 2021), are also likely to improve the capacity to provide individualised support throughout the process before one-to-one interaction becomes needed. On the other hand there are challenges involved in extending the use of digital technologies in NWBL including developing genuinely effective learning communities across disparate groups of learners, and managing learners' needs for support as they experiment with unfamiliar technology.

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