Work-based learning as a university enterprise

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This short paper was written as a discussion piece for a forum convened as part of the Open University's Professional and Practice Based Learning project. It is a personal reflection rather than an academic paper; it draws partly on two papers, one on work-based doctorates (https://devmts.org.uk/pracdocs.pdf**) and one, co-authored with Professor Carol Costley and in draft form at the time, on work-based learning in higher education (**https://devmts.org.uk/slccwbl.pdf**).**

1 What is work-based learning?

I think one of the main problems for communicating work-based learning is that it's essentially so broad – in the Lester/Costley paper we describe it as "all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns." If I'm talking to a company HR director it's likely to mean non-accredited learning that goes on, often incidentally, in the workplace; in further education circles it 's assumed to mean apprenticeships, Entry to Employment, Train to Gain and occasionally foundation degrees; and in higher education other than among the 'inner circle' it will tend to be interpreted as placements, the practice elements of professional courses, in-company provision, and maybe again foundation degrees. Even within the WBL 'core' it covers a fair breadth of activities from structured initial professional development through off-job courses that take place on company premises to accredited learning largely through work activity. I find this lack of clarity can make it very difficult to explain to different kinds of organisation what exactly is on offer and how they can benefit, whether in terms of accredited workplace learning in-company, on-job HE-level progression routes for apprentices, creative routes into professions or post-initial professional development. The same problem occurs in talking to government agencies. Part of the problem is that a generic term (WBL) has become used by different constituencies to mean things that are coherent from their own viewpoints, but not at all clear from those of their potential clients.

2 Work-based learning as a field of study

A recent tendency referred to in the Lester/Costley paper and in various other sources (Portwood, Costley & Armsby etc) is to describe WBL as a field of study in its own right. Apart from being a strategy to create a space for generic work-based research, this works to protect WBL from being fragmented among individual faculties and departments and having the values, paradigms and ways of working of specific disciplines imposed on it. So far I'm in full agreement. Where I think it is problematic is that it provides an opportunity to create another kind of academic discipline and paradigm which work-based learners are asked to work within – transforming them into work-based studies students rather than practitioner-learners. Once this happens I suggest the WBL 'project' has lost its way and reverted to becoming just another academic discipline and form of delivery that is used to 'colonise' the workplace (to borrow a term from Scott *et al*).

3 An issue of robustness

The idea of colonisation (or more specifically 'reverse colonisation,' *ibid*) leads on to what I think is a fairly central issue for the credibility of work-based learning in higher education. If the university is drawn too much into the perspectives of business it can become dazzled by conventional measures of success, regardless of the level of thinking and action needed to produce them: notions of rigour, critique and creativity become undermined. A problem here, that I discuss to an extent in my 2004 doctorates paper, is that the university needs to accept Gibbons *et al*'s 'Mode 2' knowledge and at the same time to have clear notions of what is valid and robust without reverting to type. There are some good foundations for this particularly from systems traditions – for instance adequacy for 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber) and 'messes' (Ackoff), as well as the idea of systemic wisdom (Por) – along with ideas such as epistemic development and maturity (Kitchener & King, Czikszentmihalyi & Rathunde). However on the whole I haven't seen universities making much use of this kind of material, which seems to have a lot to offer about the ideas of validity and level in practical enterprises.

4 What research could WBL departments be doing?

Looking at this from an outside perspective I'm often quoting sources such as Eraut, Burgoyne, Hodkinson, Gear *et al*, Steadman, Cunningham etc on learning and development in the workplace, and WBL colleagues on how universities engage with it – which is to say that WBL departments seem to be doing mainly educational research while others are researching workplace learning. Given the apparent closeness of university WBL to people learning in the workplace, is there more scope for the latter kind of research?

Secondly there seem to be some fair-sized gaps in what we can say with confidence about university WBL. I'd like to know more about the impact of WBL on individuals as practitioners and in terms of their long-term development, and on their organisations; about what work-based projects look like and the effect they have on practice; and how much it's possible to support high-level developments without diverting practitioner-learners into doing research-specific projects. This all seems to be within the scope of WBL departments to do, but so far publications in this area are quite limited.

Thirdly, is there potential to make use of work-based projects as a research resource, both through document analysis and research synthesis and through collaborative work?

5 Should WBL departments be doing research at all?

To put forward a more contentious thought, if it is argued that WBL is not about doing research *per se* but about practical developments that are knowledge-generating, then is there a degree of hypocrisy in promoting WBL among learners while seeking to be part of the traditional academic research community as academics? My thinking here is that the authority to guide work-based projects needs to come as much from engaging in similar kinds of activity, i.e. development and consultancy, rather than from doing research on it. If DProf candidates can generate original knowledge and advances in practice through practice-based projects, then this must also be a viable way for WBL academics to generate publications.

6 A model for insight-generating practice?

The model below is borrowed from a paper I'm writing on knowledge-production in professions. To me it seems a particularly useful way of avoiding a false dichotomy between 'research' and 'practice,' and creating common ground between a profession's practitioners and those involved in its academic dimension.

A practice/research spectrum

a. Action focused on practical outcomes, providing no new insights

b. Action focused on practical outcomes, providing new insights on reflection

c. Action focused on practical outcomes while also being designed to capture new insights

d. Action focused on providing new insights while also creating practical outcomes

e. Action focused on new insights for application to or modification of practice

f. Action focused on new insights without immediate relevance to practice

Alongside this there are at least two other important dimensions:

- degree of originality: whether the insights generated represent knowledge new to the individual practitioner only, to the local community, or to the profession in general

- extent of applicability: whether the insights are ephemeral (relevant to a one-off application) or have wider and longer-term application.

WBL, I suggest, is concerned with areas b. to e. At CertHE level it may be close to the individual end of the originality spectrum (about 'learning' rather than 'research'), while at doctoral level it is at the opposite end (original knowledge / advances in practice). Picking up on my points in sections 4 and 5, WBL departments are likely to focus on c. to e., and possibly b. in relation to their own practice. My argument in section 5 is that they could base the majority of their activity in areas c. and d.