

Workbased learning as critical social pedagogy

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All social movements involve conflicts which are reflected intellectually in controversies. It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggles, practical and theoretical. (Dewey 1938, v).

ABSTRACT

This paper reports research conducted by the Workbased Learning Unit at the National Centre for Critical Social Pedagogy (N. C. Crisp). Our work on workbased learning (WBL) reframes the dualism of higher education and vocational education and training. In implementing WBL we are aware of the epistemological and historical backgrounds of workbased learning and the tensions between competing interests embedded in it. Some of these backgrounds will be explored briefly to position our view on WBL within broader educational debates. The paper argues that two main forces, economic responsiveness and critical social pedagogy form an integral, historic part of WBL. The specific expression of these debates in our application will be described as main strategies and principles developed in the Graduate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Services).

INTRODUCTION

From schools to universities, the inclusion of work in institutionalised learning processes is seen as a major advance towards a more economically viable output (ie. employable school leavers and graduates). Consequently, 'workbased learning' and its more limited sibling 'workplace learning' are emerging as the latest innovations throughout the education system. In higher education, WBL can be seen as a strategy to break down barriers between vocational and academic education and as an opportunity to improve access to higher education. Hand in hand with 'seamless' education and recognition of prior learning, WBL is making inroads in traditional education institutions. The debate about vocational outcomes of schools and universities is longer philosophical and technical. Apart from implementation issues, schools and universities are struggling to embrace WBL, which is often seen as purely instrumental and as selling the role of education short. Schoolteachers have resisted the production of 'factory fodder' since the beginning of mass education and universities pride themselves on the unfettered pursuit of knowledge. In our experience, these two positions form an integral part of a WBL dialectic, they need not be mutually exclusive and a quasi-stationary balance between economic responsiveness and critical social pedagogy can be attempted.

HISTORICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BACKGROUNDS OF WBL- A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Although spoken of as educational innovation, WBL has a long history of experimentation and the educational concepts and practices described as workplace learning and WBL have a rich epistemological tradition in debates about

- the relationship between education and the economy
- the relationship of theory and practice in education processes
- the dualism of education and training and associated social and institutional divisions.

In the following we will briefly address the three points identified above before giving examples from our practice.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

The relationships between education and the economy have been publicly debated from different viewpoints since the advent of mass education (Dewey 1916, Illich 1976, Gee 1994) By and large, since the early 20th century, education has been seen as a vehicle to deliver economic and socio-political outcomes. Dewey (1916) first identified contradictions between the principles of emerging democratic societies and classical, elitist education on one side, and the increasing demand for

technically educated labour on the other. He led the development of a new educational philosophy that would inform much of the on-going debates about the appropriate provision of education to the masses. His educational philosophy linked the requirements of a political democracy to industrial reorganisation by using the 'experimental method' - a teaching approach that develops knowledge as a pragmatic instrument to understand and manipulate one's environment (Rutcoff and Scott 1986, 13). Embracing a curriculum that delivered technical skills and knowledge, he also argued constantly and consistently for the development of 'critical and inquisitive minds' as a major role of education in the (then) new century, if that education was not only to deliver economic outcomes but to deliver the conscious and active democratic citizen as well (Dewey 1916). Furthermore, he established the argument that uncritical and compliant workers are, in fact, counterproductive to the new scientifically advanced workplace. Whilst not defined as 'workbased' the 'experimental method' shares some common features with WBL and can be seen as one of its forerunners. It introduces 'real life' experiences into the learning process and encourages students to investigate and research physical and technical applications wherever they can be found in order to develop a technical and critical understanding of their environment. The 'experimental method' actively and deliberately challenges the classical division of theory and practice in education.

These political, economic and philosophical dimensions of WBL were echoed somewhat later, on the other side of the world and across the political divide in attempts to educate the fully developed socialist personality (Krupskaya, 1961), individually, socially and politically active and responsible. The Soviet education system was charged with delivering a technically skilled, politically conscious and reliable workforce within a short period of time. The approach developed by Makarenko (1951) gave new meaning to the integration of work, education and living and informed Soviet education policy for some time, eventually contributing to the creation of a polytechnic education system. Makarenko's collectives of young people organised themselves around work sites and their requirements and based social and political decisions on a value system founded on productivity and responsibility for the new nation. Education in this context was predominantly workbased, supported by a strong commitment to self-management and accountability to the collective. Its outcomes as reported by Makarenko were remarkable in their complexity of outcomes, technical, social and political.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EDUCATION PROCESSES

The quest for an integration of theory and practice in education strongly reflected the increasing demands of industrialised societies to qualify their members to be able to apply science and technology in the production processes. As industrialised work evolved into more complex activities, the generally educated high school and university graduate was no longer seen to be capable of meeting the demands of the labour market, especially and the higher end of the qualification spectrum.

The linking of theory and practice in education has re - (in)formed the educational repertoire since the mid 19th century (Frey 1990). Described in the past as 'project method' (Kilpatrick 1918, von Bothier 1980, Waks 1997), 'experimental method' (Dewey 1938), 'Aktionsmethode' (Soukup 1972) and polytechnic education (Beck 1990), 'WBL' or the use of 'productive activity' (Wagner and Childs 1998) as basis for educational practices accompanies educational innovations that aim at 'useful' and marketable outcomes, ie. opportunities for students to better participate in socially productive, income generating activities.

A historical exploration of the theory and practice divide reveals one fundamental controversy between different philosophical stances on the origins and development of knowledge. Although a wider range of arguments exist, two main positions are historically juxtaposed in the education debate, the idealist view that knowledge exists independently of concrete experience and purpose and the materialist view of an inseparable dialectic between material basis and consciousness. Both views continue to influence current debates of the relative value of different education processes in academic and vocational institutions of learning.

Idealists in classical Greek philosophy have argued a notion of knowledge as uncontaminated by the practical purposes of human existence.

Much as these thinkers [Plato and Aristotle] differed in many respects, they agreed in identifying experience with purely practical concerns: hence with material interests as to its purpose and with the body as its organ. Knowledge, on the other hand, existed for its own sake free from practical reference, and found its source

and an organ in a purely immaterial mind: it had to do with spiritual and ideal interests. (Dewey 1916, 262-263)

Learning in this context is contemplative and directed towards the cosmos, as a model of perfect society and the learner needs to be free of real life interference. The 'loftiness' of this pursuit of knowledge is still apparent in academic practice and serves to identify 'theory' as superior to 'practice'.

On the other hand, the materialist view as argued by Marx saw " (t)he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, ...[as] directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men (*sic*), the language of real life" (German Ideology, cited in Fromm 1961, 21)

Learning in this context is active and directed towards the barriers limiting human endeavours and learners need to be embedded in the real world.

This view is echoed by many researchers of learning, who see the development of symbolic actions as based in concrete operations (Vygotskii 1978). Learning, if it is to lead to action, needs to develop as interaction of theory and practice that recognises its social embeddedness. (Leontjew 1982, Holzkamp 1985). The resulting 'praxis' integrates 'logos' and 'doxa' and strives to demystify the relationships between man (*sic*) and the world (Freire 1973). It is inherently practical, theoretical and critical.

THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING DUALISM : SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIVISIONS

Hand in hand with these differing positions on the formation of knowledge is a clear dualism of education to work and general education mirroring the separation of theory and practice. Institutionally, the separation of universities from VET systems and streaming in secondary schools represents the education and training dualism.

This dualism is a reflection of complex social arrangements . . . the source of this dualism [lies] in the division of society into a class labouring with their muscles for material sustenance and a class which, relieved from economic pressure devotes itself to the arts of social expression and social direction.(Dewey 1916, 336)

Although current changes to the education system promote the development of vocational skills across the institutional spectrum, in many ways the production of independent, critical knowledge is still seen as the domain of universities, whereas WBL, even in university courses, is seen to cater to industry interests and as under pressure to conform to utilitarian demands (Garrick and Kirkpatrick 1998). The division of academic and vocational curricula continues to provide the institutional base for the reproduction of social divisions, of privilege and disadvantage be they class, gender or race based. It directly reinforces the different value, type and accessibility of education and training and their social and economic recompense. To soften the impact of these divisions educationally, within a university context, WBL could form an integral part of a whole range of courses that are industry generic rather than employer specific. Resisting a hierarchy of knowledge they can be accessible via RPL processes that recognise vocational and professional practice as equivalent to undergraduate study.

These backgrounds and contexts position WBL not only as educational technology and method but as a site of struggle between contradictory economic, social and political interests and differing views on the role of learning and education in contemporary society. It is our argument that these tensions and contradictions impact on the implementation of WBL regardless of place and time. Invariably, they require complex management strategies if WBL is to balance the benefits, losses, inequities and disadvantages inherent in attempts to cross traditional boundaries between academic and vocational education.

WORKBASED LEARNING AS CRITICAL SOCIAL PEDAGOGY: EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE

In our practice we build on previous experimentations with WBL and struggle with the same issues: the relationship between education and the economy, the relationship between theory and practice and the education and training dualism. In the following discussion we focus on the main strategies and principles developed to guide that experimentation with examples drawn from the workbased Graduate Diploma in Social Sciences (Community Services). The course is industry generic and caters for experienced community sector workers from a cross-section of organisations (community

based, government departments, charities) and working with diverse social services clients (eg youth, women, NESB communities, housing tenants and prisoners).

Principles

WBL has led us to question the assumptions about privilege, elitism and the production of knowledge within a tightly bounded university system. As we have asked questions about what appropriate learning processes may look like when the education and training dualism is confronted, we inevitably have also confronted the university's equity practice, assessment processes, curriculum decisions and questions of relevance and utility of university learning. Our own learning process has led to the formation of a set of practice guiding principles that try and make sense of challenges generated by WBL in a university environment.

First and foremost, our overarching principle is to operate 'ad hominem', that is to put people before principles. In concrete terms, our equity processes are detailed, well developed and provide for the greatest possible accessibility. Often, universities pride themselves on their access programs allowing non-traditional students to enter degree programs, however in very few cases does this translate into the restructure of courses to cater for non-traditional students. In our program accessibility is supported by appropriate, inclusive learning processes that do not discriminate on the basis of pre-existing educational qualifications. Instead we start from a position of shared expertise in our work and as 'workers' within exploitative work environments. By recognising work as curriculum (Childs, 1997) students can actively engage in workplace enquiry and the production of knowledge is both grounded, shared and developmental. The comparison of different work practices between creates instant starting points for critical analysis and reflection as well as for the development of improved practice.

Following on from this basic position, we define learning as cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary. Work does not fit neatly within disciplinary boundaries, however disciplinary knowledge can enrich learning and diversify action possibilities. Thus learning is an active investigation of and enquiry into existing realities. Such an approach establishes a community of learners who are also ethical researchers and workers. On this foundation, the course allows for the development of skills and knowledge that is at once technical, interpretative and critical.

Main Strategies

The Graduate Diploma is conducted utilising a diverse number of strategies. Given limitations of space, in the following discussion we will limit our discussion to single examples of the approach we have taken to integration, projects, process, assessment, role diversification, assessment, and partnerships. Each of these strategies is developmental and reflects our on-going interest to continue the tradition of WBL as framed by

- the relationship between education and the economy
- the relationship of theory and practice in education processes
- the dualism of education and training and associated social and institutional divisions.

Integration

Integration takes a number of different forms: integration of learning outcomes, integration of academic and workbased contexts, and assessment that attempts to reflect the complexity of the subsequent learning. In this section, we restrict our discussion to an example of integrated learning outcomes.

It is common for university programs to consist of separate and sometimes discrete sets of subjects that are assessed one at a time by different academics, often sequentially. In the Graduate Diploma we collapsed the boundaries between subjects, and developed an integrated set of learning outcomes. In this way, we have been able to present a course that reflects the complexity of students' working environments. As part of the learning process, students are encouraged to analyse their own learning in relationship to the learning outcomes, over time. Thus they act as a set of descriptors, as well as an analytical tool (See Table 1, below).

Table 1: Integrated Learning Outcomes of the Graduate Diploma in Social Sciences (Community Studies)

What learning outcomes am I working towards by doing this course?	Did I consider this?
Have a complex understanding of the relationship between social policy, policy development and policy impact in the community services sector	
Have a complex understanding of the relationship between societal developments, changing value bases and social developments	
Have a complex understanding of the purpose, intent and impact of different levels of social policy on organisations, clients and workers in community services	
Critical analyse concepts and frameworks that impact on the provision of community services	
Develop analytical responses to the changing role of the state and individual in the provision of community services	
Apply critical and analytical competence to specific work place contexts	
Integrate multiple perspectives of community services	
Better respond to the complexity and ambiguity of client's needs and environments	
Develop complex, multi-disciplinary interventions	
Develop a complex analysis of the interface of individuals and systems	
Develop strategies for the critical reflection of everyday practices	
Consider frameworks for analysis and decision-making in community services.	
Develop the ability to distinguish between different kinds of research and their applications within the context of community services.	
Develop the ability to critically analyse the use of 'research' as a political and social stratagem	
Develop an understanding of the role played by research within the development of the community services sector.	
Develop understanding of the role of the researcher within different types of research and the impact this has in a wide range of community services settings.	
Develop submission (funding) writing skills	

Projects

The workbased project is a major component of the course. It provides the foundation for all other activities; study, research, assessment as well as skills and knowledge development. Students are asked to consider a set of guidelines when deciding on their project. Consideration is given to the time frame of the course and the potential of the total project or significant components of the project to be completed within that timeframe. In case of group projects, individually assessable task need to be identified. Given that much of the project work will occur in students' work time, projects need to be negotiated with organisational managers and need to benefits the organisation. As part of a postgraduate degree, the project needs to be sufficiently complex to allow the development of investigation and research skills. Finally, the project needs to lead to a 'product' that adds-value to the project and meets both the assessment criteria of the course and organisational expectations.

Process

The course retains a high level of face to face interaction between students, coordinator and academic staff, and promotes the value of social interaction and collective endeavours in the learning process. The number of contact hours were developed by considering the time spent face-to-face in traditional university subjects, and calculated to reflect the integration of eight subjects.

The course is delivered as a combination of

- workbased projects conducted by candidates in their organisation
- block seminars and workshops conducted by academic supervisors
- workbased learning coordinator and participants
- peer group meetings or study circles conducted by the workbased learning coordinator with small groups of students.

A discussion group is available on the net (<http://www.nepean.uws.edu.au/social/gdss/index.html>)

Assessment

Assessment in a university course is commonly conducted subject-by-subject. In this degree however, we developed a complex set of criteria to guide the assessment of workbased projects and journals. The breadth of assessment was considered through study related, work related, and project related descriptors. The depth of learning was considered through skills, understanding and analysis descriptors (See Table 2, below).

Table 2: Assessment Matrix for Assessment in Graduate Diploma of Social Sciences (Community Services).

	Skill	Understanding	Analysis
Study Related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collects information Searches for existing data Searches for literature References competently Describes raw data Summarises reference materials Provides a well-organised lay-out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows understanding of reference materials Links reference materials to the development of the project Provides a well-thought-out 'story' of the learning process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyses literature in the context of the project Provides an analysis of the learning process
Project Related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poses questions Documents peer group meetings Documents project actions (<i>Field Notes</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently writes in <i>Learning Journal</i> Understands the way the project is developing Understands the learning that occurs in peer meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a convincing argument about the way the project is being done, and why Links the <i>Learning Journal</i> to an exploration of reference material
Work Related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions project in the work context Identifies direct relationship between work and project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops understanding about work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions project in broad political, social and economic contexts Positions project in research Reflects and comments on relevance of multiple sources of data

Partnerships

In NSW, the course is offered as a partnership program between the university and a community sector peak body, the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA). Both partners contribute supervisory and teaching staff, developmental input and administrative support, a profit sharing agreement is in place. This arrangement takes seriously a need to integrate theory and practice not only by way of curriculum decisions but also at organisationally and structurally. In this arrangement, the university is not a 'provider' to industry but a partner in developing appropriate qualification processes. On the other hand, the industry partner engages in the experimental and developmental processes underpinning the course.

Role diversification

Childs (1997) argues that 'workbased learning means that not only is knowledge pooled between partners' but also that a range of different roles become available to all participants (p.37) when learning is not bounded by the teacher/student dichotomy and the notion that the academic is the only expert. In the Graduate Diploma, all participants- including academics- have diversified their roles. These roles included: researcher, networker, sounding board, client, vocational trainer, teacher, consultant, broker, resource person, trainee, administrative assistant, facilitator, story teller, process and data analysts, research assistant, expert, learner, practitioner, ethicist, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Our experimentation with WBL in a university context has indicated the need to develop principles and strategies that confront a bounded, segregated education system that compartmentalises and privileges types of knowledge. In our process of WBL implementation we have drawn on and fit into its historical and epistemological background, which acknowledges education as a site of struggle, practical and theoretical for all participants in the process.

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