Work-based Learning: the educational policy and intellectual context and their consequences

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Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to explain the policy and intellectual background that has created the context in UK universities for work-based degrees at Honours and Master Level and inaugurated a tradition of researching the different forms of learning that occur at work.

To do so, I am going to:

- describe the background to the emergence of Work-based Learning in the UK
- explain the parallel debates about learning that have spurred a massive interest in researching learning at work
- identify the consequences of this two developments

Background to Work-based Learning

The starting point for the paper is the mid-1980s in the UK. This was a period when we had a Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher, longstanding British industries, such as the automobile and electronic industries, were suffering acutely from overseas competition, principally from Japan, and it was widely accepted that we had an under-qualified workforce, specifically, at Intermediate Skill Levels (technician) and amongst Management personnel.

The Government commissioned a number of reports to address this interconnected conundrum. One conclusion was that there was a pressing need to identify new education and training initiatives to help to raise skill levels. Another conclusion was that many people at work had levels of experience that were not commensurate with their qualifications. And, a third conclusion was that Further Education Colleges and Universities were continuing their longstanding tradition of insisting that people could not enroll on courses unless they already had acquired the appropriate level of qualifications. This meant that people with low qualifications but high level of knowledge and skill gained from work were de-barred from gaining higher level qualifications.

Given the antithesis of the Thatcher Government to any measures to regulate employers' activity in the labour market by compelling them to train their workforce and a preference to

rely on 'voluntary' measures to encourage employers to do so, the Government set about introducing a raft of funded innovations to bring about change in the national education and training system. One of the most important and long-lasting was the idea of 'Work-based Learning'.

The concept of work-based learning entered the lexicon of UK higher education in the 1980s as a way to signal the introduction of new type of degree that was prepared to recognise work as a site for learning.

So much for the idea: the challenge was now to identify a way to realize it.

To do so, the Government turned to the *strategies, structures* and *systems* of Adult Education, specifically American adult education.

The strategy that they choose to adopt was to encourage employers, FE Colleges and universities to develop partnerships to support adults, who lacked Intermediate or Managerial skills, to both acquire them and to progress onto higher level of qualifications.

The structures the partnerships were encouraged to put in place were new types of work-based courses that: (i) reflected employers' interests more closely than existing courses in Further and Higher Education; and (ii) offered the learners the opportunity to gain 'credit' for the knowledge and skill that they had already accumulated. By this the Government meant, knowledge and skill gained from company-schemes (Non-Formal Learning) and knowledge and skill gained over the course of a working life (Informal Learning).

The systems to facilitate the latter development were called:

1. The Accreditation of Prior Learning or Prior Experiential Learning

The former meant official recognition within the structures of a qualification for the knowledge and skill that people had gained from attending, for example, a company-based training scheme.

The latter meant official recognition within the structures of a qualification for the knowledge and skill that people had gained through their experience of work.

This was a very radical idea because it meant to give people recognition for forms of knowledge and skill that had not been gained from traditional methods of study. To do so, it required the introduction into the UK of:

2. Credit-based Systems

This term referred to: (i) giving each college course or university degree an overall 'credit rating', for example, 180 Credits; (ii) dividing each course into modules or units (i.e. blocks of study) that had a specific 'credit rating', for example, 15 credits, and (iii) deciding how many 'credit points' would be given to non-formal/informal learning so that it could either be used as:

- 'advanced standing', that is, using the credit acquired for the acquisition of work-based knowledge and skill as an equivalent for the traditional academic or vocational qualification required to be enrolled on a course,

- 'direct credit', that is, accrediting work-based knowledge and skill within modules rather than insisting on attendance at a college and/or university.

3. Work-based courses or components within modules

These were developed as FE colleges and universities begun to expand the number of work-based projects, assignments, work placements etc within their courses so that they supported employers to develop their skill base and employees to enhance their employability.

The net effect of this framework was two-fold: the Conservative Government established by the mid 1990s an embryonic strategy and system to raise the skill levels of existing employees; and the subsequent Labour Government used this framework to encourage the growth of work-based degrees or work-based components of degrees more widely within UK Further and Higher Education. The implication of this development has come to have particular relevance for many areas of work in the public and private sector because it has enabled professionals with high-level qualifications to gain further qualifications by using their own or their colleagues practice at work as a site of research, rather than having to write arid summaries of extant research that may not even have been undertaken in the same field of professional practice.

A caveat: the principle of credit for modules is central to the recently created European Qualification Framework that has been designed to facilitate lifelong learning in European Union by supporting demographic mobility in the EU, credit transfer between EU universities, and the development of a broader-based European capability.

Debates about learning

In parallel to this development, another debate was taking place in contemporary learning theory that ultimately had huge significance for the development of a tradition of researching

learning at work in the UK and elsewhere in the world.

In 1988 Jean Lave, a Cultural Anthropologist, published a book entitled *Cognition in Practice*. Lave articulated, in this book, a vehement and trenchant critique of cognitive theories of 'transfer': the idea that people assimilated knowledge and skill mentally and having done so were able to successfully reproduce that knowledge and skill in another context. In contrast, Lave argued that this conception of transfer was politically un-acceptable and intellectually bankrupt.

In the case of the former, Lave argued that cognitive theories of learning, when allied to national systems of assessment, resulted in those young people who attained qualifications being classified as successes (i.e. capable of transferring knowledge and/or skill) and those who did not succeed classified as failures (i.e. incapable of transferring knowledge and skill). Lave, however, proved from her anthropological studies of people engaged in 'street math' that so called educational failures were enormously successful in using non-standard mathematical techniques to sort out the everyday math problems that they encountered. Clearly, it was not, for Lave, the people who were not deficient rather it was the educational system.

In the case of the latter, Lave demonstrated the inadequacies of the cognitive conception of learning: it replied on un-tenable dualistic notions of individualization (i.e. individuals considered separate from context) and mental abstraction (i.e. mind separate from practice). Using the language of social practice, which offers an integrated perspective on individual and collective activity and mental and bodily activity, Lave argued that transfer can only occur if there are relations between people based on people using ideas and tools in practically relevant ways.

This book had a tremendous impact within contemporary learning theory circles, which up until that time had been dominated by Cognitive Scientists, as a number of very influential American psychologists acceded that, stripped of its polemic, there was considerable substance to Lave's argument about the limitations of the cognitive conception of transfer.

Further momentum was given to this debate in 1991 when Lave, working in collaboration with Etienne Wenger, published another book *Situated Learning*. This volume was not mere critique. Instead it introduced an inter-connected set of arguments and concepts to constitute a new theory of learning.

The title is key: Lave and Wenger maintained that all forms of learning are context-bound (i.e. situated) and that the only way that supra-empirical connections can be made is if people, who are members of a *community of practice* (i.e. a socially constituted group with goals, distinctive forms of knowledge and skill etc) first learn to *participate* (i.e. think and act as a member of that community) and second learn how to liaise with members of other

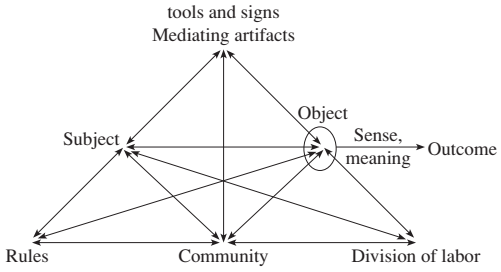
communities. Lave and Wenger maintained that this could only occur if two conditions were in place: *legitimate peripheral participation* (i.e. officially sanctioned opportunities for 'newcomers' to participate alongside 'old timers') and a *learning curriculum* (i.e. structured opportunities in the workplace to gain access to and gradually develop the forms of knowledgeability to successfully act as an experienced member of the community).

Before explaining the enormous impact that Lave and Wenger's work has had in spawning a worldwide interest in researching learning at work, it is necessary to introduce you to the other new theory of learning that surfaced around the same time as Lave and Wenger's theory.

Yrjö Engeström, a social psychologist, started to argue in the 1980s that it was necessary to formulate a new theory of learning because existing psychological theories of learning, cognitivism and constructivism, including their manifestations in Adult Education, for example, Brookefield, Knowles, Mezirow, had little to offer in regard to supporting people to change forms of professional activity. This is because they were essentially 'reactive forms of learning'; their roots were in formal education and as such they were predicated on a given context, a pre-set learning task and a view of learning that assumes we 'cope with tasks *given* to us'.

What was required, according to Engeström, was a theory of learning and a pedagogic process that supported us to rethink the object of and social organisation of activity. Engeström published his book *Learning by Expanding* in 1987. The main principle that underpins his theory is his formulation of a new unit of analysis – an 'activity system' – that allows us to apprehend the object-orientated (i.e. purpose and goals), collective, and culturally mediated (i.e. inter-connected) nature of human activity.

The Structure of an Activity System



(Source: Engeström, 1999)

The top of the figure represents the form of mediated action through which we (i.e. the subject) use cultural tools (i.e. mediating artefacts) to engage with and reproduce an activity, for example, an Accident and Emergency Department of a hospital.

This triangle is located in relation to the components of collective activity – 'community',

'rules' and 'division of labour' – that represent individuals and social groups: who share the same object as one another; norms and sanctions that specify and regulate procedures and interactions amongst them; and the distribution of tasks, powers and responsibilities.

The multivoiced (i.e. the difference of view) character of those relationships, that is, their different histories, cultural traditions and the sense of ambiguity, surprise and potential for change, is represented through the use of an oval in the model, suggesting the, as yet, unknown outcome of the object of activity.

An activity system is, for Engeström, the smallest and most simple unit that still preserves the essential unity and integrated quality behind any human activity. As such, it allows us to:

- grasp the entire structure of any activity – on its own or in its interactions with other activities – and the history of its practices and their changes and developments
- initiate changes to activities as we identify and decide how to respond to the accumulating tensions that inevitablly arise in any workplace.

Consequences of the debates about learning for work-based learning

Engeström and Lave's work has been enormously influential in contemporary learning theory. Its significance for the development of a research tradition for learning at work in the UK and worldwide is explained below. The paper concludes by highlighting a number of areas of impact.

First and foremost Engeström and Lave have been responsible for either legitimating workplaces – hospitals, factories, banks etc. – as a site of research for analysing learning in the field of education, or for further legitimating learning in the field of Organisational Science and Knowledge Management. In the case of the former, the American Educational Research Conference (AERA) a Special Interest Group (SIG) whose focus is 'Workplace Learning' and many other SIGs also focus on forms of workplace learning, the European Association of Research for Learning and Instruction (EARLI) Conference now has work as a key site of research in many of its SIGs, and there has been a massive growth worldwide in conferences that specialize in analyzing the interface between work and learning: to name but two – 'Socio-cultural Activity Research' and 'Researching Work and Learning'. In the case of the latter, there is a vibrant conference in the field of Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning

Secondly, Engeström and Lave have been responsible for introducing a battery of concepts and methodologies that are now routinely used to frame research questions and approaches in the field of workplace learning. These concepts and methodologies has spawned a number of elaborations and extensions of their ideas. See, for example, the edited collections by

Rainbird, Evans and Boud and Soloman.

Thirdly, Engeström and Lave do not however see their work as directly concerned with WbL because WbL's predominant concern is, as we have seen, to accredit knowledge and skill. In contrast, Engeström and Lave are concerned with, respectively, identifying the pedagogic processes that initiate change in human activity in workplaces or that facilitate learning in work practice without any reference to educational institutions. This concern has led to the emergence of two slightly different, albeit related, discourses: workplace learning (i.e. learning unfettered by a concern for qualifications) and work-based learning (i.e. learning for accreditation).

Fourthly, the paradox of this development is that the former is the much richer intellectual field and is where most of the new concepts and methodologies that are used for researching learning in workplaces has emerged worldwide.

Finally, the emergence and legitimation of the concept of work-based learning in the UK can be gauged in two main ways: (i) the UK's Higher Education Funding Council has sponsored national Centres of Excellence for Work-based Learning in several universities, (we have one at my university the Institute of Education); and, (ii) the concept of work-based learning has changed the focus of Professional and Vocational Education in two senses. It has resulted in the direct accreditation of knowledge and skill in PE/VE and in the erosion of the class-based nature of the distinction.

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