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Understanding Work-Based Learning

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Introduction

The book focuses on the engagement of people in employment with university-accredited learning. It is about individual learning that occurs predominantly through work. References to organisational learning are included to provide a context for other forms of learning that occur in the workplace.

In the preparation of this the authors have consulted widely, run workshops and given presentations, consequently it is based on material evidence. The text thus provides an explanation of university work-based learning including definitional issues and theoretical perspectives. Validation, the process a university goes through to give credibility to its qualifications, is a fundamental function and deserves a distinct analysis in the context of work-based learning, and consequently there are two chapters; one providing an overview and the other explaining the mechanics of the business of validation and accreditation. Other key support mechanisms are investigated, including accreditation of prior learning and experience as well as university work-based mentoring. However, the centrality of the book concerns itself with the learner experience. We sought case studies from those who had used university-accredited learning in mid-career to provide a means of addressing a number of questions.

For example, when we consider the preparation of people to enter the world of work, university-accredited learning features as the gold standard. It is the most respected route into employment and is so highly prized that students with very low or no incomes put themselves into debt in order to achieve a university qualification. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2007) estimates that 42 per cent of 18–30 year olds in the UK currently participate in Higher Education (also known as HE) and the government target is to raise this to 50 per cent. Standard and Poor's (2008) estimated that 78 per cent of those with higher education were earning more than the median salary. However, upon entering the world of employment, the role of universities in meeting learning needs seems to change. Why should this be so? Why should institutions that are so valued by those preparing for employment feature so little with the needs of those in employment?

However, before considering the chapters and case studies, it is important to position the university contribution in the broader context of learning in the workplace and university engagement with business.

Learning in the Workplace

Learning in the workplace is focused on a job and the learning may be associated with training to gain the skills, experiential learning from doing a job, or reflection about the context of that job. Importantly, the work role automatically creates a social setting and competency framework. Performance assessment in the role is intuitively conducted by work peers and line managers, in a way that is both continuous and involuntary. In the

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world of employment there is an ongoing need to make a contribution in a work team that is valued by others and this need is central to the learning that takes place.

Structured support for learning in the workplace therefore focuses on interventions that allow the individual to see how what they are doing 'fits' with the activities of others; in other words, culture building. One typically sees:

- Employee orientation courses that teach the social norms of an organisation and explain the overall purpose of a company.
- Team-building events where employees learn to interact constructively in challenging settings.
- Feedback processes that expose the employee to the views of peers, bosses, subordinates, clients and so on.
- Away-days where employees can reflect either individually or collectively on the workplace context.
- Lessons-learned exercises at the end of projects or missions to disseminate experience in a way that is accessible to others.
- Training to ensure that the statutory obligations of the organisation are shared as obligations of the individuals.

These interventions are initiated and managed by employers as part of their human resource development process and respond to perceived business needs or gaps in organisational capability. The decision whether to initiate a specific programme is taken in the context of other business options and competing calls on the company's management resource. It's a business decision taken like any other business decision. The knowledge dealt with in the events listed in the bullet points above is very context specific and often only relevant to those participating in the event itself. They are usually regarded as quite private affairs.

This is a different approach to the one a higher educational institute might take when considering whether to run a course. Universities have a tendency to represent themselves as disseminators of knowledge to meet a societal need. By this they mean teaching codified generalisations of 'universal truths'. A higher education institute will make its business case for a course in terms of a perceived ongoing need to disseminate these truths in the student market. But the employer-structured support for learning in the workplace does not disseminate knowledge of that type. The learning experiences in the workplace occur naturally as part of an activity which has another specific purpose.

An organisation is a group composed of specialists working together on a common task, and its function is to make knowledge productive (Drucker, 1993). Knowledge always stays with the individual and a social process is needed between individuals so they cooperate in making their knowledge explicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Interventions that make a group of individuals work more effectively as a team are a crucial source of competitive advantage for the organisation.

University Engagement with Workplace Learning

Perhaps the biggest distinction between workplace training and a university education is that in workplace training less than 20 per cent of trainees are engaged on

programmes leading to nationally recognised qualifications (King, 2007) and of these the vast majority will be working for QCF level 2 or 3 qualifications. By contrast, in a university or college 100 per cent of trainees are seeking recognised qualifications at higher level. It is therefore not surprising that universities barely feature in the workplace learning. As Connor and Hirsch (2008) observe, businesses spend at least £400m annually at universities on continuous professional development (CPD) and other short courses....it pales into insignificance with the £38bn businesses spend on training, £5.5bn of which is potentially accessible by higher education institutes (also known as HEIs). Also, it is the case that business spend with higher education institutes is heavily skewed to a few universities, 12 accounting for 50 per cent of the spend (King, 2007). Employers do tend to want to work with universities with a brand strength that can enhance their own.

So where are the examples of universities contributing to learning in the workplace? Much of the reason for higher education engagement in the workplace centres on increasing the student intake with new graduate entrants. Vocational training courses for new entrants and management skills training for those promoted to middle management feature strongly. As Connor and Hirsch confirm, investing in leadership and management continues to be seen as the priority in workforce development. Most businesses use internal resources for this but others turn to higher education institutes for specific management qualifications (especially Master of Business Administration (MBAs)) and short bespoke courses.

There are situations where individuals are making a career step for which the experiences in the current job cannot prepare them. Hence, there is a need to expose the individual to new knowledge to fast track their learning. This is a very different situation to that described in the first section of this chapter where the individual is essentially learning by exploring their own experiences. It is a form of learning which is easier to relate to a university course because it involves exposing the learner to knowledge and skills which are outside their current experience. However, even in this situation it is not evident that universities are the best provider. In many of the professions, courses provided by institutes have greater credibility in the workplace and, hence, appeal to learners. Universities often seek course endorsement by the same professional bodies to attest their relevance in the workplace. More recently, sector skills councils, bodies set up by government to represent industry skills needs, have also begun to play a role in this attestation process.

The spectrum of university engagement with job-specific learning can be summarised as follows.

CONVENTIONAL FULL-TIME COURSES

By definition, a full-time course is one where the agenda is controlled by the academic institution. It is a learning experience often described as academic, taking place within a set of closely managed framework of rules. By necessity, the time commitment for study is in direct conflict with the time commitment for full-time employment. However, in the past some employers sponsored staff to do full-time courses at universities as part of their career development. This is now a rarity and as the *Business Week* survey of part-time courses shows, the majority of provision is aimed at learners undertaking career breaks, not learners enhancing their current job roles. This need to leave employment in order to

progress academically makes it an expensive investment in time and money and involves the risk of not finding suitable employment on return to the employment marketplace. For this to happen, there needs to be a strong expectation of a major career boost or lifestyle change. In addition, the employee goes to the university as a student with the benefit of their work experience. This prior workplace learning is rarely brought into the conventional full-time university programme in any meaningful way. The conventional full-time course is really a workplace-learning interruption rather than a workplace-learning progression, a timeout model.

CONVENTIONAL PART-TIME COURSES

The part-time course represents a step towards accommodating the needs of those in employment by at least recognising that the time commitment for study needs to fit more closely with employment and social commitments. It is probably the most common method that those in employment achieve academic qualifications. These courses range from day-release schemes to evening classes, and are often combined with distance, open and interactive learning. They often appeal to individuals who feel that their career prospects are limited by old out-of-date awards or the lack of academic qualifications, but cannot afford to disrupt their careers or lose earnings. MBAs are particularly popular in this respect, as are other postgraduate programmes. Individuals without degrees or even A levels can usually gain access to such postgraduate programmes based on a wealth of relevant work experience which can be articulated. It is an example of universities recognising non-academic experience as an entry qualification. It suggests there are processes and procedures which can support work-based learning. However the part-time course is still essentially an academic-learning experience staged in parallel with a workplace-learning experience. One of the criticisms seen in our case studies is that these courses do not take sufficient account of the student's workplace experience and the length of time is arbitrary (for example, a three-year full-time degree course taking six years part-time to complete).

DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance learning is a more flexible form of course for those who cannot attend regular campus-based lectures. Distance learning was pioneered by the Open University (OU), and remains the world's leading provider of this type of programme. Learning of this type is excellent for widening the participation of students from all walks of life in higher education. However, one suspects that a large number of people in full-time employment dabble in OU courses as a way of topping up their knowledge base, a more recreational activity. It must also be pointed out that distance learning, by itself, lacks the human interaction with peers which is such an essential part of a learning experience. Several of the case studies highlight the importance of getting away from the workplace to engage with other learners and experience an environment that places emphasis on collegiality, ideas, discussion and reflection. Distance learning features as an important element in many types of course but is combined with other forms often described as blended learning.

FOUNDATION DEGREES

Foundation degrees were set up as part of the UK Government White Paper 'The future of higher education' and their purpose is defined as follows in the HEFCE prospectus (2000):

'The foundation degree is intended to help education providers supply the labour market with the high-quality graduates needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills, as well as making higher education (HE) more affordable, accessible and appealing to a wider range of students – thereby widening participation in HE and stimulating lifelong learning.'

These courses are thus fundamentally a preparation for entry to work, rather than learning through work, but nevertheless focus on the vocational skills associated with a job role. In these courses a period of work experience is essential so that the student can experience first hand what the job role entails. However, this type of learning is difficult to manage unless the student is already linked in some ongoing way to the employer. Many work placements are of doubtful value. It is notable that in many large companies (for example, BP) work placements for students are managed as a 'corporate social responsibility' exercise by the public relations department. Unsurprisingly, feedback from many students is that they don't feel they have been allowed to do anything substantive. Work experience comes from accountability for a job role, not the observation of the workplace. For this reason many of the early Foundation degree course fell well short of student expectations.

A recent development, where workplace training is recognised as part of the course, has opened up a route for people to take Foundation degrees while in full-time employment. For example the 'Tesco' Foundation degree and a similar programme by TUI (a large company in the holiday sector) both integrate company training programmes into Foundation degrees provided by partner universities. This model is ideal: companies recruit people who lack some of the theoretical knowledge or intellectual skills for the job role and want a university to help with training. These new developments are only now taking their first students but there are high hopes that this will be an effective learning model for those in employment. Nevertheless, they are still courses in the conventional sense of university provision bound by the same regulatory frameworks, assessment regimes, timetables and attendance constraints.

APEL AND SHELL COURSES

In France it is quite possible for someone in full-time employment to catalogue a portfolio of their workplace learning and have a university award a degree on the strength of this evidence (Garnett et al., 2004). However, in the UK this capturing of prior learning, accreditation of prior experience and learning (APEL) rarely, if ever, counts for more than a maximum of 60 per cent of an award. Also, it is perceived by students as overly time consuming (UVAC, 2005, p. 33) and thus defeats the purpose of exempting the student from coursework. Amongst the Russell Group, a self-selecting elite group of UK universities, there is strong resistance against recognising any learning that the university has not controlled. However, there are more progressive universities that see their role as supporting learning wherever it occurs and enabling students to build on their existing

learning experiences. The model they use is the 'shell' course which is essentially a content-free programme. The university imports learning undertaken elsewhere into this framework. An example is the McDonalds degree course where the McDonalds' suit of management development programmes is treated as modules by the university. The university validates the courses and quality-assures student assessment but does not design the course or participate in provision. This is an extension of the model described in the 'Tesco' example above and relies heavily on the quality of human resource management provided by the employer. Nevertheless, it is a model which genuinely starts with a workplace development agenda and uses the workplace as the location of learning. It is the leading edge of accredited workplace learning.

Sabbaticals

Some companies, particularly large companies, re-energise their management cadre or upgrade a cadre of professional staff by exposing them to leading edge thinking in business. Short bespoke courses are often arranged at prestigious university business schools, but are rarely accredited. The prestige of the company and the university convey all the endorsement that is needed to make the course valued, and employers tend to think that formal accreditation might discourage staff participation. In essence this is the opposite end of the spectrum to the model in previous section. In the 'shell' system the workplace provides the learning experience and the university places it in an academic framework. In the sabbatical model the university provides an escape from the workplace and an experience that stretches the imagination of the employee, but there is no attempt to place it in an academic framework. It is interesting that Oxford and Cambridge universities report that 80 per cent of the course places sold to business are these non-accredited short sabbaticals.

Conclusion

It appears that there is a paradox. The formal educational system puts significant effort into generating learning experiences for students so that they are prepared for the labour market, yet once these students are in the workplace they lose track of their learning progression and the relevance of that provision becomes devalued. The learning process adopts a form which educationalists find difficult to relate to. It is as if they believe legitimate and verifiable learning can only take place within the confines of their campus. By the same token, those in full-time employment become accustomed to this different style of learning and often begin to see the academic alternative as out of touch, esoteric and lacking relevance. For them, the term 'academic' takes on a negative persona.

Yet this need not be the case. There is evidence taken from the annual HE@Work large company survey to confirm that those in full-time employment want to progress academically (Dunn et al., 2008). This survey also suggests that the alignment of workplace needs and academic provision is strongest in postgraduate areas. Postgraduate learning is where university research and business development interests often seek a similar type of knowledge. This may provide an insight into the academic nature of work-based learning and a rationale for learner progression. In the academic world, career progression entails

becoming more focused in a specialist area of knowledge, thus becoming the expert. In the workplace, learning and progression is also very specific to a focused area of knowledge, but this knowledge is not necessarily recognised for its academic content. If this academic content remains unrecognised does it mean that content does not exist? No – it just means the academic content is not visible or has not been ‘mined’. This suggests that the missing element may be a process for describing workplace learning in a way that demonstrates its academic worth. Understanding this process is the purpose of this book.