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Workplace Learning, VET and Vocational Pedagogy: the transformation of practice

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Workplace Learning, VET and Vocational Pedagogy: the transformation of practice

Abstract

The paper addresses workplace learning; vocational pedagogy, education and knowledge; and the transformation of practice. It draws upon discussions of vocationalism, vocational pedagogies as well as the constitution of vocational knowledge(s), debates which are set within particular historical and socio-economic as well as national contexts. It points towards the limitations of analyses of workplace learning and in so doing draws upon conceptualisations of 'really useful knowledge' and subject based disciplinary knowledge. Workplace learning can easily fold over into an instrumentalism concerned with enhancing variable labour power. The paper argues for a recognition of the articulation between practice-based and employer interest in VET, set against wider disciplinary understandings and access to powerful and transformative knowledges. It is suggested that disciplinary knowledge when allied to workplace experiences can be appropriated by oppressed and marginalised groups, thereby becoming 'really useful knowledge' to be marshalled in the struggle for social justice. This then is the pedagogic challenge - to open up possibilities that themselves presage not only the transformation of practice but also social relations.

Workplace Learning, VET and Vocational Pedagogy: the transformation of practice

Education plays a key role in the perpetuation of the capital relation; this is the skeleton in capitalist education's dank basement. It is just one of the many reasons why, in contemporary capitalist society, education assumes a grotesque and perverted form. It links the chains that bind our souls to capital. (Allman, et al, 2003, p149-150)

Schools of the vocational type, i.e. those designed to satisfy immediate practical interests, are beginning to predominate over the formative school, which is not immediately 'interested'. The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school appears and is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them in Chinese complexities. (Gramsci, 1971, p40)

We educators need to reclaim our professional freedom of thought and action; to introduce a curriculum that deals with the threats we face; and to renew both our educational 'system' and our society through democratic values and practices. (Coffield and Williamson, 2011, p76)

This paper addresses a number of critical questions concerned with: workplace learning; vocational pedagogy, education and knowledge; and the transformation of practice. It draws upon discussions of vocationalism, vocational pedagogies as well as the constitution of vocational knowledge(s), debates which are set within particular historical and socio-economic as well as national contexts. In the European Union Initial Vocational Education and Training (i-VET) as well as Continuing Vocational Education and Training (c-VET) is seen as having a significant role to play in the development of social inclusion/cohesion (EU 2002, 2010; and see JVET, 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge, as Sabates *et al* (2012, p233) remind us, that i- and c-VET are not all of a piece in Europe and will be accented differently on the basis of the particular context in which they are located. In a similar vein Mulder (2012) has discussed the way in which the terms used to describe VET are accented differently across societies and that there is no consistency in understandings of the terms. We need only think of the contrast between German and English responses to VET, with the former placing a significantly higher value on it than the latter.

For some writers the EU, other western economies and indeed the global economy have been profoundly transformed over the last thirty years or so (Guile, 2010). Some writers have described these shifts in terms of the move from fordism to post-fordism (see Avis, forthcoming). This concern articulates with the significance accorded to the development of a knowledge or information society and the need to develop knowledge workers. In the EU there is a commitment to the furtherance of a knowledge based economy (Kbe) and for some member states, such as the UK, an interest to re-balance the economy away from financial services towards manufacturing.

This rests alongside the fiscal crises facing western economies as well that of the Euro, which in turn sits with the increasing competitive and economic strength of the BRIC

nations, that is to say Brazil, Russia, India and China, as well as with the crisis of the over accumulation of capital (see Harvey, 2010). There are a number of ways in which the changes that have impacted upon western economies in general and the EU in particular have been understood. Such understandings have influenced the way in which the relationship between work, knowledge and vocational pedagogy have been conceptualised, as well as the forms of skill required in a Kbe.

I want firstly to comment on workplace learning (WPL) and am going to conflate workplace and work-based learning (WBL) in order to focus on learning at work regardless of whether it is credentialised. Notably, for some writers,

Work-based learning needs to be distinguished from workplace learning, that form of learning that occurs on a day-to-day basis at work as employees acquire new skills or develop new approaches to solving problems. No formal educational recognition normally accrues to such learning, whether or not it is organised systematically. **The emergence of work-based learning acknowledges that work, even on a day-to-day basis, is imbued with learning opportunities (Garrick, 1998), heretofore not recognized as educationally significant or worthwhile. Work-based learning gives academic recognition to these opportunities, when suitably planned and represented**". [my emphasis] (Boud and Symes, 2000, p14)

Work-based learning is workplace learning that is acknowledged and credentialised with the two terms effectively having the same object but with the latter being recognised and legitimated. After having examined WPL/WBL the paper then considers the notion of vocational pedagogy which ties into a discussion of knowledge, with the transformation of practice being an implicit theme of the paper. Importantly, a current running through this paper is a concern with social justice and what Johnson has described as the development of 'really useful knowledge' (Education Group, 1981, p37).

'Really useful knowledge' was a knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed and why through the force of social circumstance, you were the kind of person you were, your character misshapen by a cruel competitive world. (Education Group, 1981, p37)

What 'really useful knowledge' adds to the discussion is a broader conceptualisation of knowledge than the 'useful knowledge' normally associated with the workplace. The former introduces a necessary political element into the discussion as it moves the debate beyond restricted notions of social justice and equal opportunity. There has been a degree of slippage in discussions concerned with the relationship between vocational pedagogy and work, particularly in the UK. This arises in relation to the manner in which the needs of capital and social justice are addressed. The logic here is one that emphasises the development of competitiveness, up-skilling and implicitly the suggestion that if this strategy is followed an increasing standard of living will arise from which all members of society will benefit. These ideas are embedded in the rhetoric of the current Conservative/liberal democrat coalition government in the UK as well as previous New Labour and Conservative administrations (see Avis, 2011). However, the current difficulties facing the EU serves to problematise these putative claims. For example Brown, Lauder and

Ashton (2011) discuss the high skills low wage nexus as well as digital Taylorism in a somewhat bleak analysis (and see 2011, p8). The suggestion here is that partly as a result of global competition and the development of knowledge workers in the BRIC nations, the spectre of high skilled low waged work hangs over the west. In addition as a consequence of the mobilisation of digital technology and the standardisation of knowledge work there is a polarisation amongst knowledge workers of a highly paid transnational élite set against those knowledge workers involved in standardised processes. This is what Brown *et al* have in mind by digital Taylorism.

Workplace learning, work-based learning and social justice

It is important to recognise that the interest in workplace and based learning, knowledge, practice and transformation has a long history. Such learning is tremendously important for the on-going advancement of capitalism as well as capital's interest in the development of variable labour power and value-added waged labour. Workplace learning is also important for workers in the development of survival strategies in oppressive workplaces, as well as resistance to exploitative conditions of work, such practices frequently involving collective processes. However, the current interest in workplace learning derives from at least two currents. Firstly, there is the realisation that in societies such as Britain the majority of the workforce in 2020 will have already left full-time education. Felstead, *et al*, write,

The fact that 70 per cent of the UK workforce of 2020 are already in work has increased its [WBL] saliency still further, since most are beyond the reach of schools and may be out of reach of further and higher education. (2009, p3)

Allied to this is a second current whereby the increasing speed of change means that a premium is placed upon WBL, which aligns with the rhetoric of the knowledge society. In other words we will all be enjoined to learn at the workplace, with such changes informing the ways in which workplace learning is conceived.

Frequently analyses of workplace learning assume an overly optimistic hue. Writers such as Billett (2005) argue that the acknowledgement and credentialising of workplace learning serves the interests of social justice through its recognition of worker skills and knowledge that are frequently overlooked and remain outside the qualification system (and see Boud and Symes, 2000, p18). There is something of a moral imperative within Billett's concern to value work/labour that others may construe as demeaning. He therefore tends not to address the negative aspects of workplace learning. However, for writers concerned with WBL these arguments sit alongside issues of equal opportunity and access to educational credentials. Billett links the idea of 'just arrangements' with the recognition of the skills 'disadvantaged workers' have developed in the course of their working life. He writes,

Finding means to legitimately and authoritatively recognise skills acquired through work hold the prospect of providing **just arrangements** for these otherwise disadvantaged workers as well as those requiring recognition throughout their working life. [my emphasis] (Billett, 2005, p944).

However, there does seem to be a difficulty with Billett's position. At best he seeks to accord some dignity to those who labour in low paid and undervalued jobs. However, this does little to challenge the social relations of work, its neoliberal context or indeed current

conditions of austerity. This is not to deny the salience of workplace learning for capitalist enterprises for without it such enterprises could barely function. Nor is this to deny the very real skills 'disadvantaged workers' develop at the workplace acquiring 'useful knowledge'.

Another putatively progressive current is found in theorisations of WPL that stress the importance of socially situated practice. Here we encounter arguments that emphasise the socially situated, collective and collaborative nature of WPL. Such a stance emphasises the specificity of WBL/WPL and the context in which it is set. It therefore points towards the need for the re-contextualisation of practice as participants move from one workplace to another. This re-contextualisation as workers enter a new workplace will impact upon their identities as well as the nature of knowledge. Billett (2008) in a discussion of hairdressers contrasts the identities and knowledge associated with a fashionable salon set against one serving an elderly clientele. The important point to make is that both identity and knowledge are situationally based and the notion of a straightforward transfer from one site to another simplifies what can be a messy process, and in some senses a transformative one.

Importantly, there is an affinity between the previous arguments and those that address occupational standards, competency based education and training (CBET), and learning outcomes. This arises because the concern to recognise and credentialise workplace learning can readily lend itself to such conceptualisations in as much as these are relatively easy to assess. There are at least three points to make about these stances towards WPL that have been discussed in this section. Firstly, they are concerned with the development of variable labour power and the enhancement of workers productive capacities. Secondly, the progressive and social justice implications of WPL/WBL can easily be exaggerated as a result of being closely tied to capitalist interests and often mobilising a truncated model of vocational education. Thirdly, these processes will be uneven across societies and sectors and consequently the way in which these are played out in particular situationally based contexts becomes an empirical question.

Vocational pedagogy/education

Here I comment on vocational pedagogies and draw out the links with WPL and the preceding discussion. A straightforward understanding of vocational pedagogy/education refers to learning for work thereby developing the skills to labour effectively. However, this is a peculiarly Anglo Saxon conceptualisation of vocational education and pedagogy. Clarke and Winch have suggested vocational education is thought of quite differently in some social formations and is reflected in the recent work of Sabates *et al* (2012).

In the Anglo-Saxon world vocational education is considered as a narrow preparation for working life - a process that this is rather technical and practical in nature. Whereas in other social formations the academic and vocational are brought together with VET embracing civic education, which is as much about personal development as it is about addressing the needs of employers. Indeed it has also been linked to identity formation as well as to nation building (Green, 1991). It is also important to think about the socio-economic contexts in which VET is situated as well as what could be described as the hegemony of the 'neoliberal

embrace' in these austere times. Thus vocational pedagogy/education is marked by the history and cultural formation in which it is located, leading to broader or narrower understandings of VET.

There are a number of models of vocational pedagogy/education, here I focus on two. Firstly, competency based VET (CBET) orientated towards learning outcomes and standards, which has been criticised for being overly restrictive and narrow with a tendency to reduce the complexity of practice. In this model teaching and learning becomes a matter of box ticking, and carries a restricted notion of pedagogy, trammelled by standards etc. But as with i- and c-VET, CBET is not all of a piece, with Biemans *et al* (2009) writing about Dutch comprehensive and multi-dimensional approaches to CBET. Secondly there are those models that focus upon socially situated workplace practices. These accounts start from the workplace, emphasising the socially situated nature of workplace practices and their specificity. This calls for the recognitions of learning that arises in the workplace and that in effect develops variable labour power. The danger is that this becomes a form of conservative practice as it does not move beyond the local and specific.

Paradoxically, conceptualisations of the knowledge worker and the volatile and rapidly changing economic conditions sits uneasily with the VET and its competency orientation and focus upon learning outcomes (and see Guile, 2010). In the British context competency orientated vocational education and training (Jessup, 1991) and conceptualisations of learning outcomes have been subject to critique for their instrumentalism, lack of flexibility and anti-educative consequences (see Avis, 1991, 2000; Clegg and Ashworth, 2004; Hyland, 1994; Wheelahan, 2009). Yet these elements have remained pervasive, reflected globally in the development of National Qualification Frameworks, as well as regionally in the European Qualification Framework. Whilst these frameworks are not all of a piece they do nevertheless reflect the impact of global conceptualisations rooted in neoliberalism, in that they are wedded to markets and allied notions of transparency.

These frameworks seek to facilitate the comparison between different qualifications as well as enabling the mobility of workers. However, as a result of their focus on learning outcomes and competency they tend to be retrospective in nature. That is to say, vocationally they are concerned with what learning outcomes or competences employers deem to be relevant and therefore tend to operate with a truncated and instrumental notion of knowledge. In this sense they are anti-educative, denying the 'epistemic gains' or 'powerful knowledge' that can derive from subject based disciplines (Allias, *et al* 2009a,b). The point to be made is that forms of knowledge acquired in the workplace are situated and more often than not tied to and are developmental of processes of 'production'. They are extremely important for without them workplaces could not operate and on occasions can lead to an understanding of the exploitations and oppressions surrounding the labour process. However, such knowledge is of a different order to disciplinary/subject based knowledge and provides access to rather different 'epistemic gains' operating for the most part on the terrain of the capitalist enterprise.

Powerful knowledge and distributive Justice

There is another elements to these arguments. Not only do they seek to validate workplace learning, they also reflect what Green (2009) describes as, the practice turn, set against a particular understanding of academic disciplines that feature in Anglo-Saxon societies and particularly England. These are construed as sterile, lacking relevance and far from the concerns of learners and in particular the working class, often being seen as élitist and distanced from anything other than a superficial commitment to social justice. Yet at the same time, arguments that seek to validate workplace learning can easily fold over into an instrumentalism concerned with enhancing variable labour power, marked by a genericism that addresses employer needs and is business facing.

Towards a Social Realist Vocational Education

Here I draw on the work of Leesa Wheelahan and Michael Young. This is set against the preceding understandings of VET, in particular its instrumentalism and genericism, whereby educative processes become business/employer facing, creating a new kind of knowledge structure. Beck and Young write that genericism is,

linked explicitly to the perceived demands of employers and to their assertion that future employees would need to become more 'flexible'; and they [generic modes] assumed that becoming more 'flexible' was a demand that was common to a wide range of occupations, tasks and jobs. (Beck and Young, 2005, p190)

For Wheelahan and Young amongst others, academic disciplines provide access to powerful knowledge. For these writers such access constitutes a form of distributive justice, in as much as this type of knowledge is distinctive, it can enable us to understand the world and provide a route for intervention. Whilst, knowledge is socially produced by a disciplinary 'community of practice' that judges the validity of knowledge claims. This is nevertheless the best we can do, and for Young, is the basis of the objectivity of knowledge. Importantly, whilst this reflects relations of power it nevertheless provides access to powerful knowledge. The claim is that these epistemic gains are not immediately accessible to other forms of knowledge.

For Wheelahan VET learners need access to disciplinary knowledge, and not in a piecemeal manner, for only by doing so will learners be able to participate in 'society's conversation' about these disciplines. However, there is as Biesta's (2004) term suggests, the potential for 'transcendental violence' and therefore learning. In this case learning can serve to disrupt our readily accepted conceptions and for Wheelahan, through an understanding of disciplines we are better placed to engage in society's conversations and by implication the political and democratic structures of our social formation. However, it is important to align such practices with the lived experience of those who engage in workplace processes.

Dialogic forms of curricular practice that enable learners to carry everyday knowledge into the classroom and set this against disciplinary/academic forms offers the possibility for learners to interrogate these and develop understanding. However, there is nothing particularly radical about this argument and it aligns with what many teachers already do in the classroom. A more radical stance is introduced if classroom relations are set not only alongside wider structural relations but also against patterns of social antagonisms that exist within society. Such an understanding acknowledges the relationship between knowledge

and social interest, albeit that the former is not overdetermined by the latter, retaining its own level of autonomy. A more radical stance would also recognise the articulation between practice-based and employer interest in VET, wider disciplinary understandings and access to powerful and transformative knowledges. This means that disciplinary knowledge can be appropriated by oppressed and marginalised groups, becoming 'really useful knowledge' to be marshalled in the struggle for social justice. This then is the pedagogic challenge - to open up possibilities that themselves presage not only the transformation of practice but also social relations. It might be argued that the debate in this paper is predominantly focused upon the US, UK and those western societies wedded to neoliberalism. However, it does stand as a warning to those erstwhile social democratic societies in continental Europe who in austere times may be inclined to embrace neoliberalism even more closely. (Solow, 2008; Bosch and Weinkopf, 2008; Henriksson, 2012; Neimeyer, 2010; Seddon, Henriksson and Niemeyer, 2010)

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