



University of Chester



**This work has been submitted to ChesterRep – the University of Chester's
online research repository**

<http://chesterrep.openrepository.com>

Author(s): David Major

Title: The place and status of knowledge in Work Based Learning

Date: November 2002

Originally given at: Work Based Learning Network of the Universities Association for Continuing Education annual conference

Example citation: Major, D. (2002, November). *The place and status of knowledge in Work Based Learning*. Unpublished conference presentation given at the Work Based Learning Network of the Universities Association for Continuing Education annual conference at University of Wales Institute Cardiff, 27-28 November 2002.

Version of item: Given at conference

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/121254>

Conference paper

Major, D. ; 2002 ; *The Place and Status of Knowledge in Work Based Learning* ; in Conference Proceedings, Work Based Learning Network of the UACE, Nov. 2002 ; UWIC

Conference Paper for UACE Work Based Learning Annual Conference

Knowledge, Work and Learning

27 & 28 November, 2002

Conference paper presenter :David Major, Chester College of Higher Education.

Conference paper title : The place and status of knowledge in Work Based Learning

Abstract : *This paper seeks to examine some of the epistemological issues which relate to the debate concerning the justification of Work Based Learning in the HE curriculum. It will take account of post-modern perspectives on the theory of knowledge and of the so-called knowledge revolution and the impact these have had on the University. The perceived divide between academic and vocational knowledge, universal and local knowledge, and Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge will be discussed, and it will be argued that such ways of thinking are inappropriate and a hindrance in any attempt to arrive at a satisfactory way of understanding the place and status of knowledge in Work Based Learning. It will be argued that Work Based Learning is involved as much in knowledge creation as it is with the application of knowledge and, therefore, that more holistic ways of perceiving knowledge are required. The paper will continue to argue that a more helpful way of thinking of knowledge (especially when arguing the case for WBL in HE) is in terms of its **level** rather than its type, and it will conclude by commenting on Barnett's concept of the practising epistemologist, and suggesting that this befits the profile of both the WBL facilitator and learner, before pointing to Raelin's contention that Work Based Learning needs a new epistemology of practice.*

Key issues to be addressed

I do not pretend to be able to do anything more in this paper than to hint at what some of the issues are in respect of knowledge in the context of Work Based Learning. The key questions to be addressed are : what is the **place** of knowledge in Work Based Learning? and what is the **status** of the knowledge generated through Work Based Learning? In the context of higher education, there is also the question of what knowledge is required **prior** to the Work Based Learning experience for learning through work to be truly effective? This raises the matter of higher education support systems for Work Based Learning including, for example, prior knowledge in areas such as methods and processes associated with Work Based Learning, research methods, self knowledge, knowledge about others (especially the workings of groups, teams, organisations) and other knowledge drawn from social psychology (which,

arguably, provides an underpinning discipline for much of the generic knowledge associated with Work Based Learning). Clearly there will be evidence of knowledge growth in many of these areas through Work Based Learning but there seems to be a case for an entrée into some generic knowledge (that is, knowledge not specific to the work context) either prior to or running alongside (in the case of those learners in full-time employment) the planned programme of Work Based Learning which feeds into, and is part of, the overall learning experience.

The post-modern context

No contemporary discussion concerning epistemology can avoid post-modern perspectives on the theory of knowledge. Over recent decades, debates of a philosophical kind, concerning the nature of knowledge, have been fuelled, in particular, by the epistemological concerns of post-modernism. These concerns impinge directly on issues to do with the curriculum offered in Higher Education. Some commentators refer to a crisis in higher education concerning knowledge (for example, Barnett & Griffin, 1997). The role of the Universities, it is argued, has been undermined in recent times through the arguments of post-modernism (such arguments have been largely carried out in the Universities so, in effect, it is undermining from within) concerning the provisional and contextual nature of all knowledge. This raises questions for the University in respect of its traditional role as guardian of knowledge, and in respect of the status of the knowledge it may generate, and the claims that it makes about the knowledge that it transmits. Add to this the reality that the University no longer has a unique role in respect of any of its key functions regarding the generation, guardianship and transmission of knowledge, and the so-called crisis in higher education begins to make some sense. Griffin (Barnett & Griffin, 1997) claims that knowledge, as we have known it in the academy, is coming to an end as a result of loss of faith in the Enlightenment project (p3). The idea of the progressive development of human **reason**, giving us faith in the “grand narratives” (Lyotard), has all but been destroyed by the arguments of post-modernism that knowledge is culturally related, always partial, and specific to certain contexts.

While not losing sight of that understanding of knowledge, it is possible to overstate the contribution of post-modernism to debates on epistemology. As Scott (*ibid*) notes, it is the universalist claims to knowledge that are in peril. Science, in its disaggregated pieces, is in good order (p16). This suggests that, while disciplines such as philosophy and theology may have been shot through with post-modern arguments, other areas of knowledge have been left relatively unscathed. I assume, for example, that advances in medicine have hardly been touched by the post-modern debate on the theory of knowledge.

If the arguments of post-modernism are right, especially in respect of grand narratives – and, of course, we have no means of being certain that they are – it would seem to be a good thing that the University has been forced to reappraise its own understanding of the knowledge it has generated and transmits. If this results in an apparent loss of faith in its *raison d’être*, this would seem to be better than it living under an illusion. What has happened, of course, is that the University has integrated post-modern thinking which, as I indicated earlier, it has been largely responsible for generating, into its curriculum and into its research. Thus, it could be argued that the

University has inflicted itself with post-modern thought and it probably affects it more profoundly than it affects other walks of life.

The knowledge revolution

A far more serious development and potential threat for the University, fuelled in part by post-modernism, but largely made possible through technology, is the so-called knowledge revolution which has made knowledge the property of everyone. Again to refer to Scott (ibid), what is happening to knowledge may be more to do with its wider social distribution than to its epistemological dislocation (p21). He speaks of this wider distribution taking two forms. One is the re-emergence of local knowledge as opposed to expert or abstract knowledge. The second is the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 (Gibbons et al, 1994) knowledge. In both cases the biggest adjustment for the University is the recognition of the validity of both local knowledge, and what is represented by, so-called, Mode 2 knowledge. If anything has upset the apple-cart for the University, it is not so much post-modernism per se, but the knowledge revolution, the full impact of which has not been assimilated by the higher education sector. Barnett (1994) speaks of a paradigm shift brought about as a result of discipline-based, propositional, knowledge being challenged by experiential learning, transferable skills, problem-solving, group work, Work Based Learning and others. He makes the point that these are not just about new teaching methods but illustrate the changing definitions of knowledge that are taking place. He concludes that legitimate knowledge is being broadened to embrace 'knowing how' as well as 'knowing that', and comments that knowledge acquires an operational character (p46-47). Arguably, Work Based Learning straddles the divide between the knowledge which the University happily recognises, and the knowledge which it finds hard to accommodate, and therein lies a significant challenge to the place of Work Based Learning in the higher education curriculum.

My argument is that a move away from perceiving knowledge as either academic or vocational, universal or local, Mode 1 or Mode 2, in fact anything which divides knowledge, to perceiving knowledge as a whole but having different **levels**, removes immediately any philosophical objections which the University might have to the admission into its curriculum of Work Based Learning. Such an acceptance means that the only legitimate concern the University should have concerning knowledge is its level rather than its type. In many ways, this argument is already won. There is ample evidence of the broadening scope of subject matter into the curriculum. I maintain that, given the arguments of post-modernism and the fact of the knowledge revolution, it is right and proper that this should be so and that, by the same token, there are no pressing philosophical or practical reasons why Work Based Learning too should not be fully admitted into higher education.

In addressing the **place** of knowledge in Work Based Learning it is necessary, though perhaps self-evident, to state, along with Boud (Boud & Solomon, 2001) that "a basic assumption of Work Based Learning is that knowledge is generated through work"(p36). The object of learning is always the acquisition of knowledge in some shape or form. All workplaces are essentially sites of knowledge production with different workplaces generating different knowledge depending on the nature of the work in question. It may be worth differentiating, at this point, between 'hard' knowledge and skills, related to the specificities of a particular workplace, and the

‘soft’ knowledge and skills which are generic to any given work situation (for example, self knowledge and knowledge of the other, especially perhaps in the context of team-working, negotiating, knowledge of strategies in communication, and so on). Both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ knowledge and skills will be learned (and produced) in the work setting.

It has become customary to speak of the knowledge revolution, in the sense where it is understood that knowledge is the principal asset of corporations and nations (Matthews & Cundy, in Boud & Garrick, 1999). Such knowledge is subject to a dynamic process through which it is enhanced and renewed. This points to a continuing need for Work Based Learning as a means of generating the **intellectual capital** so crucial to the success of businesses and organisations. At the same time, the **process** of learning points to the value of Work Based Learning for the individual and, where individuals within an organisation are learning, it becomes possible to speak of the **learning organisation**. A particular difficulty in assessing the **place** of knowledge in a work setting may be the actual identification of what the knowledge is. Much knowledge in the workplace is of the tacit or implicit kind. This unarticulated, and often taken-for-granted, knowledge so evident in practice, is frequently shared and forms the knowledge-base of a community of practice (ibid).

A holistic view of knowledge

In the context of the justification of Work Based Learning in the higher education curriculum, it is important to make the point that Work Based Learning really does include knowledge **creation** and is not only a question of the **application** of knowledge. Mention has already been made of the Mode 1/Mode 2 knowledge distinction drawn by Gibbons et al (1994) and it is worth expressing some concerns over this differentiation in the context of discussing the **place** of knowledge in Work Based Learning (though, clearly, this is also about the **status** of the knowledge generated through Work Based Learning), principally because there is the danger of driving further the already existing wedge between so-called “academic” and so-called “vocational” knowledge. While I can see the helpfulness of the distinction in some contexts, and while I recognise that the abbreviated descriptions usually proffered to clarify the difference between Modes 1 and 2 knowledge distort the fuller concepts articulated by the authors, nevertheless, I see the distinction as essentially unhelpful in supporting the case for the justification of Work Based Learning in the higher education curriculum. Although the government has recently articulated a clear message (not least through the availability of funding) to the higher education sector that it looks to it to develop a third principal activity, namely that of knowledge application, alongside the generation and transmission of knowledge, it is not necessarily helpful to isolate ‘application’ in this way. The ‘theory’ implicit in any ‘application’ may be considered as a pre-investment of knowledge but, nevertheless, the theory is integral to the process of application and cannot be divorced from it. On this ground it could be argued that applied knowledge is a more advanced form of knowledge than pure theoretical knowledge, in that it is a demonstration of the absorption of theory in practice. However, it could also be argued that, through application, the knowledge itself is developed and enhanced. (The view that knowledge is somehow degraded or diminished as a result of **application** is not only outmoded but totally unacceptable and clearly fallacious. Outmoded, too, is the view

that knowledge-in-application is somehow of a different status or order to knowledge-in-abstract-thought.)

As indicated already, it seems to me that the debate should focus not so much on modes of knowledge (each representing a different status of knowledge), but **levels** of knowledge, and that it should be recognised that knowledge generated as a result of the application of theory advances that knowledge or lifts it to a higher level. On this model, modes of knowledge prove unhelpful just as they do in terms of arguments concerning the place of Work Based Learning in the University. As already implied, higher education is still wedded to dualism when it comes to understanding knowledge. Inappropriate though this may be, it is still accustomed to distinguishing between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ knowledge and between ‘theory’ and ‘application’. In each case, traditionally, it places a higher value on the former than it does on the latter. The notion of Modes 1 and 2 knowledge simply reinforces this divide and suggests to the University that it was right all along to concentrate its attention, almost exclusively, on Mode 1 knowledge, leaving Mode 2 knowledge to those dealing with vocational education and, therefore, better suited to it. For the reasons given, I am inclined to disagree with Boud (Boud & Solomon, 2001,p37) who views the further analysis of Mode 2 knowledge as a way forward for research into Work Based Learning.

The point about Work Based Learning is that it does not, or should not, recognise any divide in knowledge in the first place. Not only is it unhelpful to its cause, but it is also, I consider, a travesty of the truth of the matter. In and through Work Based Learning, knowledge is far more **holistic** than the notion of Modes 1 and 2 knowledge implies. Knowledge is applied in Work Based Learning but, in the application, that knowledge changes. It becomes richer by advancing theoretical as well as practical understandings and, thus, becomes **new** knowledge. In this sense, knowledge is generated in and through work-settings where Work Based Learning is consciously undertaken. This is to the extent that we may safely talk of Work Based Learning as having a **knowledge base**. Once this is conceded, we are not far from the contention of Portwood (Portwood & Costley, 2000), that Work Based Learning has a justifiable claim to be regarded and treated as a **subject** in its own right.

The status of knowledge in Work Based Learning

That the **place** of knowledge is central to all programmes of Work Based Learning is not, or should not be, in question. The only question that higher education has to wrestle with concerns the **status** of that knowledge and, as I have argued above, if the debate is shifted away from **types** of knowledge to knowledge **levels** then the issue all but disappears. This may be easier said than done, however, given the way in which, traditionally in the University, knowledge is codified and organised. As Boud & Symes (Symes & McIntyre, 2000) clearly indicate, Work Based Learning challenges traditional codifications of knowledge. They point to the way in which working knowledge is often unbounded, unruly, and much less subject to disciplinary control (p25). While acknowledging the workplace as a site of knowledge production, they rightly note that that knowledge is difficult to compartmentalise in terms of the traditional epistemological frameworks associated with University study (p24). The status of such knowledge is, therefore, highly likely to be called in question by

academics representing the status quo because, somehow, status is accorded to knowledge by virtue of it being given the protection of a discipline.

The arbitrary nature of disciplinary divisions has, of course, long been debated in the University and, given the widening of the curriculum found in most Universities today, such divisions have been stretched, in some cases, almost to breaking point. As Barnett (1990) suggests, we have reached a point where the basis on which various forms of knowledge are declared admissible and acceptable to higher education are far from clear. He adds that modern epistemology has given up the search for the ultimate foundations of knowledge. If there is no single epistemological stance which underpins the University curriculum, then, as far as Work Based Learning is concerned (or, for that matter, any other contender), all depends on the quality of argument advanced for its epistemological legitimacy. While there is no call for the abandonment of traditional subject boundaries, it may be time for the Universities to give up the pretence that they are somehow more than convenient ways of organising the curriculum. If this latter point is accepted, then the way is paved for the full admission of Work Based Learning into the higher education curriculum, and the danger of the status of its knowledge being discriminated against is lifted.

A new epistemology of practice

Barnett's (1997) notion of the academic as practising epistemologist also seems relevant in the context of this discussion. The practising epistemologist is one who is able to use multiple discourses to interpret the world and who, like the post modernist, recognises that what counts as knowledge is more open and more subject to broader definition than may have been the case in the past. There would seem to be a sense in which the academic as practising epistemologist has to accept responsibility for defining knowledge and for justifying its **levelness**. Whether or not Barnett's argument, that the only place of supremacy left for academics in respect of knowledge is in meta-knowledge (that is, knowing about knowledge), is accepted or not, the point that he makes about the academic being both in and of the world (that is, having societal value) is pertinent in the context of Work Based Learning (p152). The danger of the work based learner becoming too specialised and having too narrow a view of learning and of knowledge is also overcome if Barnett's understanding of the practising epistemologist is used as a benchmark. All work based learners should be practising epistemologists in that, to address the requirements of graduateness, they must transcend the view of knowledge either as purely theoretical or as functional and narrowly contextual, and view the world through multiple discourses, engaging in critical thinking, critical self-reflection and critical action, as appropriate. The practising epistemologist, properly conceived, is one who embraces learning and knowing in a much more holistic sense than disciplinary perspectives normally allow. Barnett (1994) refers to **reflective knowing** as an epistemology oriented towards the "life-world", a concept of which Habermas speaks, and Barnett, perhaps reflecting the post modern view, maintains that reflective knowing accepts that **all** kinds of knowing can help us to understand the world better just as, at the same time, it knows that all forms of knowing are partial (p179).

Raelin (2000), speaking in similar vein to Barnett, contends that Work Based Learning needs a **new epistemology of practice**, including both declarative and procedural knowledge, and suggests that a critical issue for such an epistemology is

when to introduce explicit instructions and reflection to yield optimal performance. Any epistemology that underpins Work Based Learning must presumably, given that Work Based Learning is a form of experiential learning, start from the understanding that knowledge is created through action and, in particular, reflection on action. However, as indicated at the start of this paper, there is the question of prior, or supporting knowledge, to take into account. Some of this may relate to 'hard' knowledge and skills (that is, knowledge and skills drawn from appropriate disciplines) and some to 'soft' (that is, knowledge and skills drawn from such disciplines as social psychology) but, in both cases, the point at which such knowledge is admitted for critical consideration is crucial.

At the point at which it is admitted into the learning cycle, such knowledge loses, to some degree, its original context through its absorption into the work place setting and the work based learners learning agenda. Once admitted, the knowledge input is subject to critical reflection and critical action through which process **new** knowledge is created or knowledge is developed and enhanced. Given this coalescence of knowledge from potentially multiple sources (some 'hard', some 'soft', some impinging on the project in hand, some on the self-understanding of the learner) in the service of a specific goal or goals, it may be argued that an epistemology of practice for Work Based Learning is a **holistic** epistemology. Alternatively, one could see it as an integration of epistemological traditions which, in coming together, act in the sense of a new epistemological framework, forming an epistemology of practice. In contradistinction to the divisions of knowledge into different types, spoken of earlier, an epistemology of practice sets aside anything that leads to a bifurcation between theory and practice on the grounds that it is epistemologically unsound. It also considers that pure scientific method needs to be tempered with issues arising from application and that disciplinary knowledge needs to be corrected and qualified by knowledge from other disciplines and from everyday life. Raelin (2000) comments that theory contributes importantly to practice but practice contributes to theory and identifies gaps between formal research and processes in the field. In this way theory can be united with practice which is consistent with the philosophy of praxis (p62).

Other recent epistemological debate suggests that traditional ways of conceptualising knowledge and skills as separate entities is misleading and would see this area reconceptualised under the generic rubric of knowledge. As I have argued already, knowledge involved in action includes conceptual or propositional knowledge (knowing 'that'), procedural knowledge (knowing 'how') and strategic knowledge (knowing 'what to do' and 'when'). As Eraut (1994) notes, conceptual, procedural and strategic knowledge is underpinned by 'personal' or dispositional knowledge (knowledge concerned with values and attitudes) based on experience. Contemporary theorists see these concepts of knowledge as highly interactive and inseparable and regard them as part of the same process of learning that brings about new knowledge. This reinforces the idea that an epistemology of practice is a holistic epistemology.

Concluding remarks

All I have been able to do in this paper is to touch upon some of the issues that I consider to be pertinent when discussing epistemology in the context of Work Based Learning. My view is that it is of vital importance that those of us involved in Work Based Learning in Higher Education debate openly the case for its justification within

the HE curriculum and that we move beyond the pragmatic arguments in an attempt to establish clear philosophical and educational reasons for its inclusion. This seems to me to be the principal reason for this conference and, therefore, I am delighted to have been able to take part in the debate.

References/Bibliography

Barnett, R ; 1990 ; *The Idea of Higher Education* ; Buckingham ; Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press

Barnett, R ; 1994 ; *The Limits of Competence* ; Buckingham ; Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press

Barnett, R ; 1997 ; *Higher Education : A Critical Business* ; Buckingham ; Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press

Barnett, R & Griffin, A (Eds) ; 1997 ; *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education* ; London ; Cassell

Boud, D & Garrick, J (Eds) ; 1999 ; *Understanding learning at Work* ; London ; Routledge

Boud, D & Solomon, N (Eds) ; 2001 ; *Work-Based Learning : A New Higher Education?* ; Buckingham ; Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press

Eraut, M ; 1994 ; *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence* ; London ; Falmer Press

Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., & Trow, M. ; 1994 ; *The New Production of Knowledge : The Dynamics of Science & Research in Contemporary Societies* ; London ; Sage

Portwood, D & Costley, C (Eds) ; 2000 ; *Work Based Learning and the University : New Perspectives and Practices* ; Birmingham ; SEDA Paper 109 , Staff & Educational Development Association

Raelin, J.A. ; 2000 ; *Work Based Learning : The New Frontier of Management Development* ; New Jersey ; Prentice Hall

Symes, D & McIntyre, J (Eds) ; 2000 ; *Working Knowledge : The New Vocationalism & Higher Education* ; Buckingham ; Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press

David Major
Chester College of Higher Education
September, 2002

