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Author(s): David Major

Title: A more holistic form of higher education: The real potential of Work Based Learning

Date: December 2002

Originally published in: Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning

Example citation: Major, D. (2002). A more holistic form of higher education: The real potential of Work Based Learning. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 4(3), 26-34.

Version of item:

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/121266>

Published article

Major, D ; 2002 ; *A More Holistic Form of Higher Education : the Real Potential of Work Based Learning* ; in The Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Vol. 4, No.3, Dec. 2002

A more holistic form of higher education : the real potential of Work Based Learning

Summary

This article takes, as its starting-point, the concept of ‘critical being’ developed by Barnett in Higher Education : A Critical Business (1997). It then examines the potential of Barnett’s position for a philosophy of Work Based Learning in a higher education context, arguing that Work Based Learning, appropriately conceived, combines the three key features of Barnett’s critical being, namely critical reasoning, critical self-reflection and critical action. The article goes on to consider the place of both the ontological and the epistemological dimensions to Work Based Learning, in an attempt to make a case for Work Based Learning as a more holistic way of being and knowing than conventional University education provides for.

Background

Work Based Learning is a relatively new phenomenon in the higher education curriculum and, as such, does not yet have a vast body of literature associated with it. What has been written, especially in terms of a rationale for its existence, tends to focus on higher education’s responsiveness to the present political, social and economic imperatives (what I refer to as the pragmatic argument for Work Based Learning). This alone does not seem to me to be a sufficiently convincing argument for its admission in to higher education. My view is that, if there is to be an argument for the justification of Work Based Learning in the University curriculum, principally it must be made on philosophical and educational grounds.

Given that, in the paucity of literature that there is on Work Based Learning, very little attention has been given to its philosophical underpinning, there seems to be an urgent need to begin to make a philosophical case for it. In my attempt to make a contribution to this necessary endeavour, I draw on the work of Ronald Barnett, a philosopher of education influenced by post-modern thought who, in the work I refer to, makes a radical examination of the purposes of higher education. Although he does not write directly about Work Based Learning, what he has to say about the desirable outcomes of the higher education process in general, I would contend, is entirely consistent with what I consider to be the potential outcomes of programmes of Work Based Learning in particular. From my own experience, of more than ten years, of working with undergraduate students on programmes of Work Based Learning, and of analysing and evaluating feedback received from them about their experiences, it is clear to me that, for many, the impact of Work Based Learning is a broad one which includes their critical self-reflection and critical action as well as their critical thought. It, therefore, seemed to me that Barnett’s concept of “critical being” was a good place to start in seeking to underpin Work Based Learning with a philosophical perspective.

The definition of Work Based Learning that I use for the purposes of this article is that of any planned programme of accredited learning in a higher education context. This may include the experience of Work Based Learning for an undergraduate in full-time study as well as the experience of Work Based Learning of a full-time employee on a part-time programme of study who is following a planned programme of learning through work.

I am, clearly, an advocate of Work Based Learning and unashamedly intend to point to its positive features. In terms of its potential for both widening participation and providing for lifelong learning, I believe that it has a great deal to commend it. It is a means through which higher education can acknowledge the reality of work in the lives of many people and recognise work as a principal source of learning for many. However, I recognise that, despite any claims I may make about its efficacy, Work Based Learning is still in its infancy in the higher education context and there is still much development work to be undertaken and rigorous evaluation of its impact to be made before extravagant claims about it and its benefits can be made with confidence. While not wishing to divorce philosophy from empirical evidence, I still feel it worthwhile to focus on philosophical issues in this article and, in advance, beg the indulgence of the reader if this gives the impression of an idealised view of Work Based Learning that may or may not be considered to be defensible.

The concept of critical being

In his book *Higher Education : A Critical Business*, Barnett (1997) argues that higher education should “dispense with critical thinking as a core concept...and replace it with the wider concept of critical being” (p7). The critical being is someone who “embraces critical thinking, critical action and critical self-reflection”(p1). Barnett considers that critical thinking has become a “defining concept of the Western University”(p2), but is concerned that this is limiting the range of the individual’s critical potential through a narrow focus on knowledge. Criticality, in Barnett’s argument, takes place in three domains of which knowledge is one. The other two domains are the self and the world which, in Barnett’s view, have been largely neglected by the University in favour of knowledge. To be effective in the world, Barnett suggests that the individual needs to exercise not only critical reason but also critical self-reflection and critical action. These three abilities, acting in harmony, are what, in Barnett’s view, constitute gradueness which, in turn, points to the responsibilities of higher education being wider than those it currently exercises, especially in respect of personal and professional development.

Criticality in a work context

There is, I believe, much potential in Barnett’s philosophy of higher education to support and underpin a philosophy of Work Based Learning. Although Barnett does comment on the potential application of criticality in the workplace, he believes that the sort of criticality businesses and organisations require is strategic in character which places limits in terms of the level of criticality achieved. Thus, Barnett is cautious about admitting the workplace as a site of potential development of critical faculties given that the intent of the workplace is to deliver “instrumental ends” and “not critical thinking that is oriented to truth or to understanding” (p14). Critical action comes with the same health warning from Barnett, namely that, although action elements are now common in higher education and do contain components of criticality, the interpretation of those critical components is usually limited to

instrumental ends. “Action for social and personal transformation is not typically envisaged” (p85). In respect of this comment, my view is that Work Based Learning does offer a framework for criticality which goes beyond the instrumental and which can indeed result in personal transformation. However, I recognise that a case still has to be made for this claim.

Barnett notes that critical reason will be in evidence in companies but limits will be placed on it. For example, he suggests it unlikely that critiques of a company’s mission, tacit values, effect on society and on the lives of its employees would be welcome unless they relate to the company’s well-being (p125). Critical thinking will be mainly limited to operational and strategic concerns (p14). Similarly, although the critical self will be encouraged, especially in respect of total quality management and just-in-time management, with individuals taking responsibility for their own actions and for the level of critical engagement with work practices, such will be for instrumental ends only (p125). Barnett notes that the fear of anarchy causes critical action to be mistrusted and, therefore, held at operational levels only (p125). The corporate world, according to Barnett, wants the “critical mind but not too much of it” (p126). The workplace experience is, therefore, partial in respect of the overall requirements of the University.

However, Barnett seems to be of the view that, although higher education is being driven by an “instrumental agenda” (p91), largely set for it by Government, and therein lie some potential dangers, this closer involvement in the wider world is precisely what the University needs if it is to help students to engage seriously in critical self reflection and critical action. Thus, Barnett is not antagonistic towards innovation in higher education, and not, so far as I can tell, antagonistic towards Work Based Learning, rather his attack is aimed at the limited concept of higher education that has been pervasive for more than one hundred years (p90). In fact, he sees recent developments in higher education as giving rise to the possibility of the personal dimension being recaptured. He also hints at the potential of the workplace for the development of criticality in the three domains identified and insists that the business world needs the full influence of the critical mind, not least to deal with the world in which they find themselves (p126). “In the corporate world,” says Barnett, “the three spheres of criticality – critical reason, the critical self and critical action”, need to come together (p128). Barnett insists that the world of work calls for forms of critical being, in self-reflection and action that higher education has been neglecting. “In calling for capacities of critical thinking that can break through to new paradigms of understanding” (p128), work, claims Barnett, is challenging higher education to supply knowledge to attain levels of critique in that domain also. The corporate life calls for reflexive persons (p129), says Barnett, who seems to suggest that the term ‘professional’ implies that the three domains of criticality are present (p132-140).

Although Barnett indicates that both the work place and some innovations in higher education (for example, action research, problem-based learning and experiential learning) have potential with regard to the development of criticality, they do not attain sufficiently high levels of it (p37 & 39). He notes that they stretch “criticality across the three domains of knowledge, self and the world” (p86), but he does not see the potential of “study service” (p86) for achieving this. Instead he would probably consider it, and presumably Work Based Learning along with it, to be severely limited

in terms of the development of critical being. It is the contention of this article that Work Based Learning has precisely the potential to achieve this.

Work Based Learning as a medium for achieving criticality

Although Barnett does not tell the University precisely how it is to change in order to accommodate his broader definition of its activities, I am presuming that he does not have Work Based Learning in mind as a medium for achieving the more rounded graduate that he seeks. However, it is my contention that Work Based Learning has the potential to achieve precisely what it is that Barnett is asking for. Given that, by definition, it takes place outside the University and is located in work, it fulfils two important prerequisites for Barnett's criticality agenda, namely '**action**' in the '**world**'. I contend, also, that a **distinctive** and **essential** feature of Work Based Learning is the ability to undertake **critical self-reflection**. This contention is supported by the burgeoning literature on Work Based Learning, for example. Boud & Solomon (2001), Symes & McIntyre (2000), Raelin (2000).

The holistic nature of Work Based Learning

This focus on the **self** in Work Based Learning, emphasises the significance of the **ontological** dimension in any philosophical discussion concerning learning through work. (Barnett notes that, through critical self-reflection, we become more fully human (p45).) As anyone who has engaged in it will testify, work impacts in a profound way on being and, I would argue that, Work Based Learning can have an even more profound ontological impact. Consider the number of people who define themselves by what they do. For many, work gives meaning to their lives. (This is not to romanticise work in any way. For many, work is a curse, but this does not lessen its impact on their being. Indeed it may exacerbate it.)

Although there is an emphasis on the self, through critical self-reflection, there is a strong **relational** dimension to work and, therefore, to Work Based Learning. Relational thinking informs our understanding of the significance of the ontological dimension to Work Based Learning by emphasising that knowledge of the self comes about principally in and through our relationships with others. The work context emphasises collaboration, partnership, team-working and networking, all of which are relational activities, and all of which provide the potential for critical thought. It is worth noting that Barnett distinguishes between critical thinking (which is essentially a lone activity) and critical thought, which is, he argues, collaborative in nature (p16-17). Work Based Learning, then, in this argument, provides a potential setting not only for critical thinking (individual) but also for critical thought (collaborative). In arguing that critical thought should be central in higher education, Barnett speaks of reflexivity as not just a personal attribute or disposition but as a matter of social epistemology and ontology (p42). He describes reflexivity as an ontological concept in that to be **a person** in modernity is to take on powers of self-reflection (p43).). "Self-monitoring," he says, "becomes an embedded assumption in relation to our conception of what it is to be a fully participating member of society"(p42).

He refers also to reflexivity as a means of generating knowledge and, thus, as an epistemological concept (p43). The point is made that this is not just self-knowledge but "new cognitive resources for the community, especially when generated and exploited collaboratively" (p42). Although Barnett does not fully exploit the concepts of **dialogue** and **inter-dependence**, they are implied in much of what he has to say.

He is, for example, critical of Schon (1983) in that he believes that his concept of the professional is “unduly individualistic, neglecting the extent to which professional life is *necessarily* social and inter-subjective” (p132). He also notes that reflexivity and critique, neither of which can be constrained, “rely on open dialogue” (p92). This stress from Barnett on the interpersonal, the importance of dialogue and the notion of inter-dependence, does not necessarily sit easily with some of his other comment which seems to suggest that he is concerned that higher education is being sucked into the “agenda of economic reason”(p91) and, therefore, being used for spurious purposes by Government and society. While Barnett is right to maintain the independence of higher education, it seems strange that he should see it still as in some way needing to avoid “being used”. Accepting that the corporate world does not have a right to try to limit critical reasoning, surely does not mean that the levels of criticality, which Barnett refers to as instrumental or operational, should be summarily dismissed. As part of society, which depends for its survival, as we have seen, on the notion of interdependency, higher education (and the graduates that emerge from it) surely has a moral duty to do all that it can to support the economy. My point here is that Work Based Learning, which in Barnett’s view, may have limited potential for developing critical beings, a point which I would wish to dispute, should not, even if I were wrong, be dismissed as an appropriate medium for higher education. Barnett is, of course, quite right to remind those involved in Work Based Learning, and other forms of experiential learning, of the dangers of eliciting a weak form of self-reflection (p93 & 101). He is also correct in pointing to the need for higher education, as it widens its scope, to see self-reflection and student values as crucial (p95 & 100). Work Based Learning already sees both as essential.

Work Based Learning, it is assumed in my definition, is entered into voluntarily and for positive reasons. No one can force another person to learn. But what is it that, through Work Based Learning, people learn? There has to be something to learn and, presumably, given a broad definition, that something is **knowledge**. (This is the **epistemological** dimension to Work Based Learning.) I will return in a moment to discuss in more detail the nature of that knowledge but let it suffice for now to say that that knowledge will be of three main types: knowledge of the industry in which the work is being conducted ; self-knowledge resulting through the process of critical self-reflection, though I prefer to use the term **meaning-making** rather than knowledge in this context because, it seems to me that, knowledge and meaning-making are not the same thing ; knowledge of the world, which no one can avoid given that we all live in the world, but with a critical edge as a result of the critical reasoning and critical action that Work Based Learning promotes.

At this juncture, let me cite two examples. The first is that of a full-time female student on a non-vocational degree programme who decided to undertake a programme of Work Based Learning in a secondary school to provide her with the experience she needed to make an application for a place on a postgraduate certificate in education course and to test out her career aspiration. The job description she was given was broadly that of a teacher assistant but, in addition, she was tasked with preparing interactive ICT resources (through the use of powerpoint) to support sixth form teaching in Geography (her academic subject), and was given the opportunity to prepare and, under close supervision, deliver a number of lessons to lower school classes. In carrying out these tasks, the student not only learnt more about her subject in order to teach it, but she acquired considerable knowledge of the school as a

working environment and as an “industry”. She claimed to have made profound gains in self-learning through being confronted by many new challenges and through facing situations which required her to stand back from her experience and evaluate her own performance and the way in which, for example, she dealt with pupils, especially those who made direct challenges to her authority. In a similar way she assessed the quality of the professional relationships she established with colleagues, and evaluated both the methods she used for preparing teaching resources and their usefulness in terms of delivery in the semi-public domain of the classroom. In conversation with her tutor, after the Work Based Learning experience, she referred to the profound impact that these experiences had made on her and how they had brought about change in the way she viewed herself. Prior to the experience, she had not known how well she would survive it but, having risen to the challenge, her level of self-confidence was heightened, as was her self-esteem overall. She spoke of being proud of herself and of now having the confidence to step in to situations (of taking action in the world) where she felt she could make a difference. Of course, things may not have turned out like that for her and she may not have had such a rich and rewarding experience. She may, for example, have discovered that teaching was not for her. Nevertheless, that in itself may be considered to be important learning and revelatory of important self-knowledge.

The second example is that of a fireman in full-time employment who embarked on a negotiated programme of Work Based and Work Related Learning. Although he did not have formal academic qualifications beyond ‘O’/GCSE level, he was accepted in to higher education as part of a widening participation strategy. He wished to use the opportunity as a means of continuing professional development, hopefully facilitating his path towards promotion to a more senior management post. In reviewing his learning to date, he experienced a new level of confidence in his own ability as he found that his higher education facilitator placed a high value on the learning that he had achieved to date through his work and the in-service courses he had participated in as part of his professional development. He was encouraged to submit a claim for the accreditation of prior experiential learning and experienced empowerment as he discovered that his learning could be mapped successfully against the level-related characteristics of a University education. He claimed that this new self-knowledge gave him a new perspective on his work (which he then viewed in a more critically reflective way) and indeed on the world and, as he proceeded along his planned learning pathway, which included a mix of conventional study (shift work permitting) with Work Based Learning projects, he felt that a whole new world of opportunity was opening up for him.

What we arrive at, I would contend (and would hope that, to some degree, the above examples support), is a much more **holistic** way of learning, being and knowing than, arguably, conventional University courses are likely to lead to. It is my view that Work Based Learning, of the placement variety, has the potential to provide this broader experience for full-time students in higher education, providing them with precisely the sorts of experience that will bring about critical self reflection and a more critical edge to their understanding of the world. It may not, for the majority, lead to the qualities Barnett appears to want to see in students in terms of their preparedness to take critical action in the world. His super-hero student, standing in front of a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square, may not be a realistic expectation for

most, but there will be lesser levels of critical action that students may aspire to as a result of their increased critical understanding of the world.

For an increasing number of students, Work Based Learning, in the context of full time employment, is becoming an attractive alternative option to full-time study. Continuing professional development is frequently carried out in this manner but now, through the Foundation Degree and other flexible forms of negotiated learning (for example, as provided for the University for Industry Learning through Work scheme), there is the prospect of completing undergraduate programmes entirely through Work Based Learning. In conception, it seems to me that Work Based Learning in these contexts is no different from Work Based Learning for full-time undergraduate students. The principles are the same and, clearly it could be argued that, opportunities for critical self-reflection and a critical edge to interpreting events in the world, are extended and enhanced through a full programme of Work Based Learning, rather than the limited extent to which this is possible through the part, and frequently a small part at that, which Work Based Learning may play in some conventional University programmes. For such work based learners in full-time employment, there is a real opportunity for a programme of learning that leads to a far more holistic way of being and knowing than a full-time University programme may provide for. Barnett may not have intended his work to be used in this way but, I believe, what he is asking for in a University education has the potential to be delivered through programmes of Work Based Learning.

The potentially subversive nature of Work Based Learning

There are, of course, a host of issues that need to be resolved if my contention is to stand up to any form of critical scrutiny. Not least, is Barnett's view that the business world, though demanding critical reasoning of its employees, wishes to place limits on it so that it does not go beyond the instrumental. While it is clear that this may often be the case, it has to be accepted that, in any successful form of Work Based Learning, there are three parties to the negotiated learning agreement. Thus, the outcomes of a Work Based Learning programme, while being principally concerned with the needs of the learner, and addressing the specific business concerns of the employer, have to meet the requirements of higher education. Higher education places no limits on the extent of critical reasoning, indeed it should demand that it is taken beyond the mere instrumental to higher planes of criticality. Although employers may not particularly like this aspect of Work Based Learning, they have to accept it and accept that, by its very nature, it is potentially **subversive**. The task of the Work Based Learning student becomes that of exercising reflective judgment in relation to proposed action in any given situation.

As Barnett rightly notes, the corporate world calls for the very forms of critical being that the University has been neglecting (p128). "Corporate life calls for reflexive persons"(p129). The problem, in Barnett's view, is that the world of business and commerce wants this on their own terms. The answer from Work Based Learning is that this is not possible, even if it were desirable, which it probably is not. It is not possible for the critical being to be so boxed in. At the same time, it should be recognised that, although the critical person may have developed their powers of criticality in the context of work, they are not limited to work but can be applied to the wider world. There is, fortunately, life beyond work to which the critical edge, developed perhaps through Work Based Learning, can be applied. The reflective

judgment of the employee-learner will determine the situations at work where the application of critical reasoning to an issue suggests action beyond which the employer may wish to go. Where this is the case, the work based learner may not be in a position to do more than propose critical action, leaving the employer to make the decision as to whether implementation should follow. This has not prevented the learner from addressing the issues, even if further learning has been inhibited as a result of critical action being blocked. In the context of Work Based Learning, the employer should respect the intentions of the employee-learner, even if the critical reasoning, which resulted in a proposed course of action, is perceived by the employer to subvert the aims or mission or public face of the organisation, or some other such major concern. If, of course, the business is a learning organisation, it will have benefited from the insights it has been offered and, even if not acted upon, these may inform future thinking and planning. The University will also have a right to comment on the process of critical reasoning undertaken by the learner in the course of arriving at a judgment.

Even if the critical reasoning and the critical self-reflection undertaken by the employee-learner in the context of his or her work does not result in critical action, as indicated above, precisely the same processes may be undertaken in relation to issues and events in the wider world. Thus, it could be argued that Work Based Learning is a suitable form of learning for living in this wider world and for being a critically active being within it.

Knowledge in a Work Based Learning context

Another crucial issue for Work Based Learning concerns the nature of the **knowledge** that resides in, or is created in, the context of such programmes. Knowledge generation and transmission is the core activity of the University, even if no longer its exclusive domain. But what counts as knowledge, though perhaps previously determined to a great extent by the University, is now recognised to be much more broadly a function of society in general. The University curriculum today, to a large extent, reflects society's broader definitions of knowledge providing, as it does, many more inter-disciplinary and vocationally oriented programmes that, even in the recent past, would have been vigorously contested by academics on the grounds of their inappropriateness for study in higher education. There has been a clear shift, even within the University, as to what counts as knowledge. Whereas previously the focus of the University curriculum was essentially on the acquisition of knowledge, engaging principally the cognitive faculties of students through a grappling with the theories and concepts underpinning a discipline, there has been a move resulting, it has to be said, largely from government intervention, on **knowledge application**. This has led, among other things, to the admission of programmes of Work Based Learning. Barnett notes, however, that "knowledge situated in practice is not a newish form of knowing alongside propositional knowledge, but is a tradition of enduring character" (p12).

Although the old distinctions between education and training and between academic and vocational courses are waning, they have not disappeared altogether, and frequently reappear in the context of debates about the nature of Work Based Learning and its appropriateness or otherwise in the University curriculum. I do not wish to become impaled on that debate in this present context but to acknowledge it and move on. It seems to me that we need to move on because Work Based Learning

is not consistent with the old understanding of training but neither is it consistent with the old understanding of a University education. Perhaps it would help if we arrived at a whole new set of terms, or at least a renewed agreement on definitions of words such as 'skill', 'competence', and 'vocational'. Such words have become much more associated with training for practical task completion yet, on their own, they could, and do, relate equally to academic abilities and orientations. Work Based Learning, to a greater or lesser degree, is clearly about the application of knowledge. Again, the word 'application' raises worries for some academics who feel that this is straying beyond their territory. (This, to some extent, is at the heart of Barnett's concerns when he accuses the University of being too narrowly focused on knowledge.) Not only is this impression sometimes given but, along with it, the impression that, somehow or other, knowledge application is a lesser form of knowing bordering, perhaps, on what has been referred to as training. This is unhelpful and plain daft. Knowledge application is not a lesser form of knowing. It presupposes knowledge in the first place and takes it a step further and, therefore, it could be argued, is a more advanced form of knowing. As Eraut (1994) notes, "learning knowledge and using knowledge are not separate processes but the same process"(p25). He also observes that "the process of using knowledge transforms that knowledge so that it is no longer the same knowledge" (p25).

I am not certain that the debate, over which a great deal of fuss is being made at present, between Mode 1 knowledge (conventional understanding of knowledge as being about theories and concepts) and Mode 2 knowledge (knowledge in application) (Gibbon et al, 1994), is anything but an unhelpful distraction from the main issue. Philosophically I regard it as suspect because, it seems to me, that it presupposes two principal epistemologies, neither of which exist other than in the most general of ways. It is also divisive and, at best, in danger of reinforcing old prejudices about one mode of knowledge being superior to the other and, at worst, implying that the two modes do not, or cannot, mix. My understanding of Work Based Learning is that, if it is about anything, it is about a mix of these two, so-called, modes of knowledge. Epistemologically it is a hybrid in that normally the knowledge element of Work Based Learning is either discipline-related or, more likely, of an inter-disciplinary nature, drawing on the concepts and theories of particular knowledge discourses and, at the same time, generating new knowledge applicable to the work context, as theory interfaces with practice. (Portwood's understanding of Work Based Learning occurring where 'focused intelligence' and 'intelligent scepticism' interface is not unhelpful in this context (Portwood & Costley, 2000.) This mingling of theory, knowledge application, and knowledge generation through the discrete activities associated with learning through work, is what typifies Work Based Learning. The knowledge that results from Work Based Learning is, therefore, of a distinctive nature and defies the notions of Modes 1 and 2 knowledge, rendering the particular theory that embraces them largely inappropriate in this context.

The new agenda for Work Based Learning

Work Based Learning continues to face interesting times. Whether full-time programmes, or part-time within more conventional forms of study, Work Based Learning clearly must conform to the same criteria for an award, or part award, as any other aspect of the higher education curriculum. The Quality Assurance Agency framework for higher education qualifications applies equally to programmes of Work Based Learning as to more conventional forms of study. What is happening,

however, at the present time, is that, through various Government funded initiatives such as the Graduate Apprenticeship scheme and the Foundation Degree concept, both of which are work focused and consist either entirely of Work Based Learning or are intended to have substantial elements of Work Based Learning within them, two forms of accreditation are being juxtaposed. A similar juxtaposition between the two educational sectors normally associated with these forms of accreditation is also required, reinforcing a declared intention of Government that Higher Education and Further Education shall work together more closely. These schemes, quite nicely, force the hand of both, though fail to take account of the different understandings, found within the two sectors, of the nature of Work Based Learning, leaving them to sort it out for themselves. These understandings are informed, in the main, by the different requirements of the respective forms of accreditation, with Vocational Qualifications principally requiring the demonstration of competences (with competence, in this context, being mainly defined as “can do”) and with higher education erring on the side of the higher order cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, though it must be acknowledged that the QAA framework has broadened somewhat the qualification descriptors, tentatively suggesting that higher education might also be a means to an end (with that end being ‘employment’) as well as an end in itself.

These new developments mean that Work Based Learning really needs to be redefined. At the same time, the meaning of some of the terms traditionally associated with ‘training’, need to be clarified. Thus, we need to recognise that ‘skills’ may be both practical and intellectual and that ‘competence’ may refer, as Barnett (1990) clearly indicates, equally to either academic or operational competence. Similarly, the real meaning of ‘vocational’ should be adhered to rather than using the term as short-hand for a description of manual labour.

Clarification of the nature of Work Based Learning

What, then, is this new understanding of Work Based Learning? Perhaps it is not a new understanding at all that is called for but a clarification of the notion of Work Based Learning. Work Based Learning in higher education has, since its beginnings, quite rightly focused on ‘learning’ and learning in a higher education context. From the point of view of assessment of students, this has had the effect, at least in some institutions, of examining only, what amount principally to, understandings within the cognitive domain. Little attention may have been given to how well a job was done or how effective were the strategies employed by the student, and much more attention given to their learning understood in terms of conventional assessment criteria, typically including the student’s ability to analyse, synthesise, evaluate and critically reflect. Especially with regard to the last category in the list (namely, critical reflection), I would depart from Barnett’s accusation of the limited focus of higher education, by arguing that Work Based Learning is one area of the curriculum where critical self-reflection and critical action as well as critical reasoning are required and encouraged.

Given the new situation (for example, the Graduate Apprenticeship), where either National Vocational Qualifications or National Occupational Standards (or both) have to be included in the assessment package for Work Based Learning, there is a requirement for a much closer examination of the relationship between typical higher education assessment strategies and those pertaining to so-called vocational

accreditation. We surely need to work to overcome this divide between two assessment frameworks if Work Based Learning is to be the truly holistic form of learning and knowing that, it seems to me, it has the potential to be. In any attempt to clarify what is involved in Work Based Learning, I would have to include the three-fold requirements of 'knowing', 'being' and 'doing' which, I contest, offers the sort of holistic model that may already exist, at least in the minds of some, but may not necessarily be evidenced in all forms of Work Based Learning. This model, I contend, is very much more in tune with the demands of Barnett, who argues for the critical being as the principal output of a University education, and much more in tune with an understanding of a philosophy of higher education fit for present purposes. The model must not compromise the integrity of higher education neither must it sell short so-called vocational assessment. It must embrace the three elements of knowing, doing and being which, in my view, equate to Barnett's critical reason, critical action (though I accept that Barnett may consider this to be a gross understatement of what he means by critical action) and critical self-reflection, in a far more holistic model of higher education than currently exists but which, I maintain, does exist already, to some degree, in Work Based Learning, and with the logical development of relating more closely together two currently different patterns of assessment, has the potential to offer a model of Work Based Learning that is truly holistic. Perhaps the "practising epistemologist" (p140), of which Barnett speaks, is none other than the work based learner who, in turn, is testimony to the transformative nature of Work Based Learning.

David Major
Chester College of Higher Education
November, 2002

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