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## Towards a philosophical underpinning for Work Based Learning: The ontological perspective

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## **Towards a philosophical underpinning for Work Based Learning : the ontological perspective.**

### **Summary**

*This paper recognises that Work Based Learning is a relatively new phenomenon in the University curriculum and takes the view that it is incumbent upon its proponents to articulate a clear philosophical and educational rationale for its existence in Higher Education. It seeks to make a case for Work Based Learning as an example of ontological-relational thought, a philosophical concept essentially concerning self-knowledge. A central argument is that Work Based Learning leads to more holistic ways of knowing and being than does the conventional University curriculum. It examines critical reflection as a distinctive feature of Work Based Learning and considers the potential of the latter as a means of facilitating meaning-making. The article concludes with comment on Vaill's concept of learning as a way of being.*

### **Introduction**

Theoretical perspectives on Work Based Learning are currently thin on the ground. This may be attributed mainly to the fact that Work Based Learning is something of a late-comer to the higher education curriculum. Even now, ten years or so after its introduction into HE, serious questions of a philosophical and educational nature have not been fully answered concerning its justification. Nevertheless, it is now beginning to have an impact on a wide range of Colleges and Universities in the UK, partly as a result of the introduction of such initiatives as the Graduate Apprenticeship scheme and the Foundation Degree, and also because of the British Government's assurance that it will fund higher education institutions to deliver a third level of activity. Alongside knowledge generation and knowledge transmission, there is now a commitment to developing and sustaining a stream of funding in respect of knowledge application.

While there may be little doubt that Work Based Learning is in accord with the broad concept of the modern University, given that it facilitates a number of key developments that help to make up the profile of contemporary higher education (for example, promotion of partnerships with businesses and organisations, contribution to society and the economy, enhancement of students' employability, contribution to widening participation agenda, income generation), it is not without its critics, some of whom may consider that Work Based Learning is little more than symptomatic of the attempts of successive UK governments to influence the higher education curriculum. There is a consequent danger here that what will evolve is a purely functionalist view of learning through work which does not do justice to its full potential as a means of achieving higher level learning and personal and professional development.

The driving force of this paper is the belief that proponents of Work Based Learning must go beyond the functionalist view and the pragmatic arguments in favour of its inclusion in HE, to consider the philosophical and educational grounds for its existence. If this does not happen, Work Based Learning will remain at the mercy of scholarly scepticism and cynicism about its value as a means of achieving academic awards.

Hence, this paper, which seeks to make a contribution to the theory of Work Based Learning by beginning to address some of the **ontological** issues which are pertinent to the philosophical debate concerning the justification of Work Based Learning within the higher education curriculum. While the typical view of Work Based Learning may be that it is about “doing”, this paper suggests that it is as much about “being” as it is about “doing”. It also takes the view that, typically, Work Based Learning, unlike much conventional learning in higher education, is not a lone activity but one that is engaged upon in cooperation and collaboration with others.

### **Ontological-relational thought as a key philosophical concept in WBL**

I start with the idea that **relationality** is a key philosophical concept in Work Based Learning and I propose to argue that Work Based Learning may be viewed as an example of **ontological-relational thought**. This idea is derived from a certain amount of empirical evidence concerning the learning process, including a longitudinal study undertaken at Alverno College, Milwaukee, USA (Mentkowski et al, 2000) and research undertaken at the University of Chester, UK (Major, 2005). While the Chester research focused exclusively on Work Based Learning, the Alverno study was concerned with “learning that lasts”, and focused on Alverno’s distinctive model of the curriculum and its impact on student learning. That model includes a form of Work Based Learning (referred to as off-campus experiential learning or OCEL) as an integral component of the curriculum. Both studies identify the following key features of the learning process :

- knowledge is retained and reinforced through practical application
- learning is a holistic process, crucially involving the self awareness of the learner
- learning is best achieved through collaboration with others (Major, 2005)

Given that work is rarely a lone activity but occurs mainly within the context of communities of practice (Matthews & Candy in Boud & Garrick, 1999), it follows that learning through work is essentially collaborative and relational, suggesting to me that it is reasonable to foreground **relationality** as a key philosophical idea in Work Based Learning. The Chester research indicates clearly that learning in the context of work is multifaceted and needs to be understood in a holistic way (Major, 2005). Such learning may impact as much on individuals themselves in terms of self awareness as on developing work processes or growing in understanding of theoretical models and concepts. Again, evidence from the Chester study indicates that “more than half of those interviewed.....claimed either that Work Based Learning had brought about growth in self-knowledge, or that it had changed their view of themselves, or that it had brought about self examination”(Major, 2005). In other words, through Work Based Learning, learners had cause to reflect on their own “being” and on their own “being-in-relation”, hence my justification for the use of the

word 'ontology' and the use of ontological-relational thought as a potential underpinning philosophical perspective for Work Based Learning.

Ontological-relational thought represents a way of knowing about or understanding oneself (and, as such, is a kind of epistemology relating to self-knowledge) in the context of relationships with other human beings. The idea can be found in the theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (for example, Bonhoeffer,1955) and has surfaced in some feminist discourses (for example, Loades,1990). Bonhoeffer's analysis of the concept of person shows that it is in the context of relatedness that people come to a true understanding of themselves. Relatedness provides, in Bonhoeffer's view, the basis for knowledge about ourselves, about the other person and, in the context of theological usage, about God.

Feminist theological discourse similarly emphasises relationality in contradistinction to the individualism which, it is argued, pervades the male perspective and has resulted in the domination and control approach of patriarchy. More generally, liberation theology (of which feminist theology may be considered an example) also has a strong relational perspective and, interestingly, offers the model of praxis which has to a large extent, through the influence of Freire's approach to adult education, been adopted by proponents of Work Based Learning as a key aspect of WBL methodology. The liberation model of theology was adopted by theologians working in situations of oppression and injustice who considered the Western model of theology, which is essentially an intellectual approach working from scripture, tradition and reason before deciding upon action, inappropriate for their particular circumstances.

This is not dissimilar from a central argument of some proponents of Work Based Learning who maintain that the idea of a theoretical higher education followed by application of theory when one arrives in the work setting is not necessarily the most appropriate model. Barnett (1990) makes a similar point concerning higher education in general implying that "a curriculum which first offers students theoretical components and then expects them to put theory 'into practice' in the practical situation is misconceived". He suggests that "the balance of curriculum elements should be reversed with the student learning how to practice as a professional and that the 'theory' should be derived by inviting the student to reflect on the practice to tease out the principles embedded in it" (p160).

The notion of praxis in the context of liberation is that of action (in the light of some injustice) informed by reflection. Theology as action might include a whole range of things not necessarily associated with the Western understanding of theology. Similarly in Work Based Learning, a wider range of activities are likely to be undertaken than those which make up a conventional programme of academic study.

Again, like the liberationist who sees the community (the church base community) as the key to successful action, so too in Work Based Learning the community of practice is seen as crucial in the learning process. (The term 'situated learning' may also be used of Work Based Learning to express the notion that learning in this context results from a process of participation in a community of practice.) Given that 'work' is typified by a network of relationships, Work Based Learning, as a form of learning, almost inevitably involves learning achieved in the context of

collaboration, cooperation and partnership. As Raelin (2000) notes, the organisational qualities that facilitate Work Based Learning are those where collaboration is valued over individualism (p44). This is in contrast to the highly individualistic model of most University learning. However, that model itself is constantly under review and, in recent years, there has been a shift in teaching and learning methods in higher education, including some with a more relational bent, and a notable shift in assessment strategies which typically now contain a much broader range of ways of assessing students. The point is that the move to accommodate the relational-style learning that characterises Work Based Learning is no longer the huge jump that it may have been under the higher education system of twenty or more years ago.

I wish to maintain that, whereas conventional forms of higher education may inform and liberate the mind, Work Based Learning offers a more **holistic** way of knowing, a way of knowing which embraces action as well as thought and, more pertinently in terms of its distinctive characteristics, **a way of being**. Whereas the conventional approach in higher education is very much about the individual's learning, Work Based Learning has a stronger relational edge to it, recognising that work is rarely a lone activity. Solomon (Boud & Garrick, 1999) refers to the "foregrounding of the human" in the workplace and says that the "primacy of the technical is being overshadowed by the social and the cultural"(p121).) Thus, in Work Based Learning there is a stronger notion of interdependence and mutuality where learning is concerned and this, I would argue, constitutes a distinctive approach to learning and one that leads to a far more holistic way of being and knowing than may be found in other areas of University learning. Hence my claim that Work Based Learning is essentially an example of ontological-relational thought in that it has the potential to impact on not only the developing knowledge of the individual but also on the individual as a person providing, overall, a more rounded being-in-relation who is aware of the presence and power of community as part of his/her own make-up. This awareness could be construed as a spiritual dimension to Work Based Learning and, again, indicate a distinctive feature of this way of learning.

Individuals exist in social contexts and, therefore, it makes sense that learning occurs in social contexts. As Matthews and Candy (Boud & Garrick, 1999) point out, "conventional views of learning and of the nature of knowledge, especially those which consider learners as isolated individuals without a social context, are inconsistent with recent advances in the development and management of 'learning organisations'" (p60). I would go further and maintain that this applies equally to learning per se as well as to learning organisations. In other words, we need to move beyond the realms of the private learning and knowing which has been the product of conventional University learning to more collaborative forms of knowing and learning, where relationships as well as text-based learning impact and, I maintain, Work Based Learning is an example of how this can happen. Such learning may well help to create the learning organisation but the learning organisation would not exist without the learning individual.

### **The centrality of critical reflection in Work Based Learning**

I propose to move now in my argument to focus on **critical reflection** and to examine this capability in the context of meaning-making and, therefore, as a way of understanding one's own being. My contention is that any programme of Work

Based Learning must see critical reflection as central and have as a key intention the development and enhancement of the students' critically reflective capacities. In addition, I contend that the powers of critical reflection are central to any concept of gradueness and that this capability is implied, though not referred to explicitly, in the descriptor for a Bachelor degree award provided in the Quality Assurance Agency qualifications framework (2001).

Notwithstanding the fact that critical reflection is an age old human process, nevertheless, it is only in recent years that this idea has been the focus for serious scholarly critique in the modern university and much work has still to be done in this area especially in the context of Work Based Learning. Barnett's *Higher Education : A Critical Business* (1997), Moon's *Reflection in Learning & Professional Development* (1999), and Brockbank & McGill's *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education* (1998), have opened up the debate but there is still a serious need for a study which examines critical reflection in the context of Work Based Learning. If there is a single, most important, capability relevant to Work Based Learning, I would argue that critical reflection is a strong contender for the accolade. It is clearly a key and distinctive feature of any programme of learning through work. Whereas critical thinking has always been highly prized in higher education, critical reflection has been less so. Critical thinking implies a degree of detachment and objectivity in relation to the object of (conceptual) thought, whereas critical reflection is a more holistic approach implying the "involvement" of the self in the thought process. This may, of course, account for its more cautious treatment in the academic world. Critical reflection seems to me to carry with it the weight of critical thinking but includes the self in the equation. Thus, in critical reflection there is an attempt to examine the **implications** for the self (and, therefore, to make (construct) or to remake (reconstruct) meaning for oneself) in relation to whatever it is that is under critical scrutiny. It seems to me, therefore, that critical reflection is justifiably considered in the context of ontology, given its focus on the self in relation to the matter under enquiry, whereas critical thinking (thought applied to the object of enquiry) may be more of an epistemological matter.

Critical thinking promotes development of the mind and thus relates well to the understanding of the purpose of the University in conventional thought, whereas critical reflection, as already argued, is about a much more holistic way of being and knowing and is, therefore, consistent with my understanding of the outcomes of programmes of Work Based Learning, which I also maintain is consistent with a contemporary understanding of higher education. Mentkowski et al (2000) note that self reflection brings together knowing and doing (p8) and cite Perkins (p148) who argues forcefully that reflective intelligence can be developed. This suggests that a legitimate aim of programmes of Work Based Learning is to assist learners to develop and refine their abilities to critically reflect.

In the context of higher education, I would argue that the object of critical reflection is the self in relation to knowledge acquired and applied and not reflection on the self per se. As Barnett (1990) observes, criticism leads to critical self-reflection where students stand back and place their knowledge and accomplishments in a larger perspective, that is, conduct a critical dialogue with themselves (p171). Herein, some would argue, lies a fundamental difference between Work Based Learning in higher education and so-called vocational training in that Work Based Learning involves

conscious reflection on actual knowledge and experience. This is a learned and not necessarily an intuitive process and so part of the responsibility of the Work Based Learning facilitator is to assist the learner to develop his/her critically reflective capacities.

The much celebrated work of Schon concerning the reflective practitioner is about ways in which reflective processes in the context of practice can be increased and enhanced. Raelin (2000) argues that the most important competency of Work Based Learning is that of reflective practice (p47). Barnett (1990) argues that every student should be a reflective practitioner (though he has some criticisms of Schon's concept of reflective practice) in that only in self-reflection can any real state of intellectual freedom be attained (p160). Boud (Boud & Solomon, 2001) raises the question as to whether critical reflection in Work Based Learning contexts provides a sufficiently critical edge to promote the kinds of critical thinking characteristic of a University education, and concludes that some reflective activities may not (p55). However, there seems no reason why, with appropriate facilitation, work based learners cannot be encouraged to pursue the deeper critique that Boud maintains will lead to appropriate levels of critical reflection demonstrated in improved and transformed work situations where productivity is enhanced and where taken-for-granted assumptions held by self and others are noticed and questioned (ibid). As Matthews & Candy (Boud & Garrick, 1999) note, the effective practitioner actively seeks out opportunities for new learning which they describe (following Botkin et al, 1979) as 'generative' or 'anticipatory' rather than 'reactive' or 'maintenance' learning (p50). Boud also argues for the qualities of critical self reflection that take the learner beyond the **context** of learning "so that they are not trapped by the specificities of their context" (Boud & Solomon, 2001,p56). When this happens, Work Based Learning proves its potential to achieve the same outcomes as any other programme of higher education and thus further justifies its place in the higher education curriculum. For Garrick (Boud & Garrick, 1999) recognition is given to "the non-routine that forces professionals into the kind of reflective thinking that changes beliefs, values and assumptions"(p227).

### **The potential of Work Based Learning for meaning-making**

All of this is highly pertinent to the matter of ontology, as Raelin (2000) indicates when he refers to the "meta-competence" of "learning to learn" (a reflective activity) as "new" learning which has "a personal, even spiritual side" based as it is "on the self-reflexive principle of becoming"(p11). In this context, Raelin goes on to consider reflection in the context of meaning-making observing that "reflective judgment entails acknowledging that one's understanding of the world is not a given but must be actively constructed and interpreted" (p59). He reinforces this by expressing the view that "higher level reflection may not occur naturally" and therefore "educational opportunities need to be provided within the work place to provoke critical reflection on current meaning perspectives"(p60).

Raelin refers to Mezirow and the concept of transformative learning (that is, learning that takes us into new meanings) and, of course, it is in this context that questions of ontology become especially pertinent. If Work Based Learning has the power to bring about transformative learning then it is especially powerful and important in terms of the more holistic conception of higher education that I have been arguing for,

and offers further warnings about the potentially subversive nature of Work Based Learning. In transformative learning issues concerning being are transformed into issues of 'becoming' and the matters of emancipation, empowerment and self-realisation that Barnett (1994) speaks of (p191). Barnett (Boud & Garrick,1999) refers to the learning challenges faced through work which he describes as increasingly of the supercomplex kind. This requires of people that they learn more than new techniques, ideas and practices by widening the very frameworks through which they interpret the world. It is demanded of us, argues Barnett, that we become different kinds of human being and notes that change is daunting because it often calls for fundamental changes in self-conception (p37).

Work Based Learning, then, in my argument has the potential to bring about high level learning about the self in relation to the knowledge base appropriate to the work context. That learning, if it is sufficiently powerful, it is maintained, has the capacity to be transformative with all that that implies for change to one's being. My view is that Work Based Learning has the potential to address directly Barnett's view of what the outcomes of higher education should be with its potential to challenge students to come to understand themselves in a new light, to understand the world, and to act in the world in new ways (Barnett, 1997). In his chapter in Boud & Garrick (1999), Barnett discusses his ideas in the context of learning and work but does not go so far as to offer an endorsement of Work Based Learning. There is a strong epistemological issue here regarding the nature of self-knowledge, and the way in which such knowledge is generated, as well as for the body of knowledge relevant to the work context. My view is that such knowledge is developed in relation to critical thinking processes which are part of my understanding of what is entailed by critical reflection.

In addition, through critical reflection in a Work Based Learning context, a number of other potentialities exist. For example, the concept of metacognition (or, thinking about one's problem-solving processes) which may be seen as fundamental to the process of Work Based Learning. Barnett (1994) refers to metacriticism (or, thinking about thought already formed) which, again, is a process, while not unique to Work Based Learning, is found in it. Perhaps more generically there is the concept of metalearning (or, learning about learning or learning how to learn) which applies equally – perhaps more so – to Work Based Learning where acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning is an absolute requirement. Butler (Boud & Garrick, 1999) approaches this slightly more cautiously when she says that “the dominant (western) discourse of work-related learning now focuses on individuals increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning” (p137). Thus, critical reflection in a Work Based Learning context is a powerful tool for developing self-understanding, for creating the context for meaning-making with consequent changes to being, as well as for increasing one's learning and problem-solving capacities while drawing on and thinking critically about an area or areas of knowledge appropriate to the work context.

### **Learning as a way of being**

Before concluding this paper, some reference needs to be made to Peter Vaill's (1996) concept of learning-as-a-way-of-being, given its potential to reinforce what I have had to say about Work Based Learning from the ontological perspective. For Vaill,

learning is, above all, an ontological issue. He is critical of, what he terms, institutional learning which he perceives to be a control system and “not a truly educational system in which liberation of mind and spirit of learners is the primary objective”(pxv). He uses the metaphor of permanent white water to refer to the situation of constant change in which learners today find themselves, and observes that the only way of coping with it is to become an extremely effective learner (p20). His contention is that learning, in our macrosystem environments, must become a way of being, “an on-going set of attitudes and actions employed to keep abreast of the surprising, novel, messy, obtrusive, recurring events thrown up by these macrosystems”(p42). Vaill argues that, “at the very least, learning as a way of being must supplement institutional learning and often it must supplant it as the fundamental philosophy and practice of human learning”(p42). He stresses the concept of learning as a way of being by commenting that “being” refers to the whole person and, therefore, “learning extends into all aspects of life and all levels of awareness” (p43) and includes the interpersonal.

It seems to me that the sort of philosophy of learning espoused by Vaill supports the ideas that I have articulated in relation to the ontological arguments in favour of Work Based Learning, especially the notions of holism and relationality as key features of learning through work. Moreover, Vaill, in citing the kinds of learning that are important in conditions of permanent white water (for example, self directed, creative, expressive, feeling, reflexive), refers to learning which contributes to meaning-making and which has a spiritual dimension (p179). Dualistic understandings of learning (such as the cognitive, affective distinction honoured in institutional forms of learning) are deemed by Vaill to be unfortunate and, while recognising that some learning needs to occur in formal educational settings, he argues that permanent white water conditions demand that we find new ways for learning to occur through work and life (p76).

While not entirely agreeing with Vaill’s implied definition of spirituality, he does have some interesting points to make with regard to the spiritual as a way of learning and meaning-making. He notes that the spiritual “seeks to get beyond materialist conceptions of meaning”(p179) and speaks of it as “the willingness to enter into a process of dialogue about meaning within oneself and with others”(p180). It appears to be that, for Vaill, the spiritual dimension is an ingredient essential to holistic perception. It is something that profoundly enhances, enriches, strengthens and intensifies normal meaning (p183). Whether or not the spiritual is construed as essentially a religious phenomenon (and I suspect Vaill may be leaning in that direction) or as an aspect of human being alone, without the baggage of religion, it is a helpful way of looking at what is implied by holistic modes of learning and, therefore, I believe, a helpful way of seeing the potential of Work Based Learning.

### **Concluding remarks**

My main concern in this paper has been to draw attention to some ideas that I consider might go some way towards providing a potential philosophical underpinning for Work Based Learning in the area of ontology. I reiterate my view that it is of vital importance that those 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.

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