

Innovations and Practices in Work-Based Learning: Further questions about the language of work-based learning

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Editorial

In developing a new journal there are always some sections that come into play later than others. In fact, the journal has a number of sections, including refereed articles, a poster section and a section providing opportunity for doctoral students to report short case studies of their own work. We are delighted to announce that we have one poster presented in this collection, along with a series of papers that were inspired by the Work Based Learning Network of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning, UALL, Conference earlier this year, held at Teesside University on the 13th and 14th July. In anticipation of the next edition, it is hoped that people will feel inspired to get their students to present short case studies of their doctoral research.

The framework for the presentation of the case studies will be made public in January on our website for the Special Interest Group in Practice Focused Research (www.professionaldorates.org)

The articles presented in this volume emerged from the energy and excitement generated at the UALL work-based learning network conference. The whole conference had been structured by 'critical questions, innovations and practices in work-based learning'. The feedback from delegates was almost universally positive and everyone deserves thanks for the organisation and the practice that unfolded at the conference.

The mood of the conference was one which not only accepted but wanted to engage with the many challenges of work-based learning. It was also one that reflected

the multi-layered risks and tensions in facing up to what Jacques Derrida (1976) calls that '*monstrous arrivant*', the future. Such critical thinking is always inhabited with a strange freedom, which is where monstrosity comes in. As he declares in opening *Of Grammatology*: 'The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks with the constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity' (ibid: 5). Moreover, the word '*arrivant*' has to do with what comes to shore. Hence the question of the monstrous arrivant is a question of the border territory, of who or what comes to shore or turns up in the workplace.

There are always, of course, in every quarter of work-based learning discourses the obvious shibboleths constituted by the 'world of work', reflecting the power play of business interests and employer engagement. The academe, too, ever hopeful of 'new practices for new times' as David Boud, Nicky Solomon and Colin Symes (2001: 3-17) put it, always has difficulty in relinquishing some of its own powerful disciplinary borders. But, are these so many statements of facts of the way things somehow are in the discourses and practices of work-based learning? Alternatively we may suggest that such language is performative, not only saying something but imputing that one is doing something by saying it.

In the spirit of the conference the deconstructive mode of thinking that we have adopted in this editorial attempts to open further questions about our relationship with language. It takes up an approach that Tara Fenwick (2006) adopted in 'questioning terms and purposes in work-learning research'. Instead of looking at the microcosm of the possible meanings of particular common terms used in work-based learning discourses, however, the approach here is more holistic and directed intentionally towards the form of language in which such discourses are set. For example, the mission statement for the conference opens with a line which 'acknowledges that

learning is political and performative in that learning based in work... seeks to change, improve or subvert situated practice through reflection and research'¹.

For Derrida, however, performative statements are always inhabited by the ghost of possible failure, and he argues that this is not a matter of contingency that can be overcome. Rather it is for him a structural necessity that a promise is non-fulfillable. Hence, given that the performative is always inscribed by the possibility of its own failure it may be argued that this form of language constitutes a 'natural' driving force for improvements in quality at the workplace (Flint, 2010a). In being reflexive about the language in which work-based learning discourses are constituted it becomes obvious that some of our practices are often driven by what some may see as obvious limitations in the very language itself.

In opening questions about whether 'learning should be emancipatory in that it has the potential to empower learners' capacity to act', one is immediately struck by the undecidability of the situation. The form of the language give no clues as to whether this is a statement of fact or a performative. The implicit question which does not invite an answer does at least reveal the ghost of the undecidable at work in all decision making in the workplace. It is also a ghostliness that 'renders all totalisation, fulfilment, plenitude impossible' in the workplace or indeed anywhere (Derrida, 1988: 116)

It is hoped that in adopting this polemical style that opens questioning and thinking about the language of work based learning used at the conference, in the spirit of the conference, which foregrounded 'the challenges of contemporary developments in WBL', our editorial will open further questions from the very interesting studies that have emerged in this volume. In attempting to address such issues the conference had been structured along two other dimensions of thinking concerned with respectively:

¹ Conference call for papers 2010: www.uall.ac.uk/wblevents.aspx

- Pedagogic practices and Curriculum Design
- Tackling Tensions and Engaging Relationships

The issue of critical questions and the many tensions involved in work based learning discourses and practices were addressed by both of the key note speakers and the Vice Chancellor of Teesside University in their opening remarks. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Graham Henderson opened reflections on the historical and cultural setting of this university and the commerce of contemporary developments that had created the grounds for two much valued Times Higher Awards accorded to the University.

In responding to the issue of work based learning James Ramsbotham, Chief Executive of the North East Chamber of Commerce, challenged and perhaps inspired delegates with the question of whether we are 'all equipped to provide for tomorrow's work force'. His language invited many possible responses. For Ian Jones, former programme leader for work based studies at the University; it was the call for all of us to respond as partners with business, with a clear personal commitment to the role that business might play in addressing the increasing problem of disaffected young people in schools and community in general. Certainly, whatever our position we must surely welcome the possibility of industrial partners working to address such a pervasive social issue. The voice of 'business and commerce' had opened the particular challenge of a WBL partner being 'outside' the university. The language of 'outside' and the violence of its implicit binary opposition opened very directly a particular challenge for WBL in working to extend the productive forces of higher education in the workplace.

Certainly, the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977), exploration of the 'habitus' of the individual and the community immediately opens a language which immediately dispels the possible force of such binary division in its recognition of the ways we may each be disposed to, and indeed dispose ourselves to, both institutions of higher education and those of business and commerce. Such language and disposition invites

its own questions of what individuals and communities can learn from each other, not least in the way in which the *language* they variously situate themselves can so easily polarise and create division.

In the same vein David Boud, Professor of Adult Education and Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Education, University of Technology, Sydney, spoke of understanding work based learning and its 'missing dimensions', not as some theory that is somehow separated from us, but as a way of being, a way of living out lives in the complex languages that we create for ourselves. He argued that because WBL discourses and practices have tended to be dominated by the language of educators and their particular metaphors of learning, there is always a danger of such language occluding opportunities for learning in locating WBL inside HEIs and/or separating further, even within the workplace, the possible division of 'learning' and 'working'. David's challenge for us all was to rethink our metaphors of learning mediating practices and to open consideration of the language of WBL as learning *in* work as contextualised working practices.

His argument for learning as contextualised workplace praxis, and the ensuing shift of power away from HEIs as the traditional 'providers', to a partnership approach. It opened a form of language for work based learning that is circumscribed and delimited by the way organisations are structured and the agency of employees echoing points that had been identified earlier by our two other keynote speakers. The language of such a partnership approach surely takes away and dispels any possible return to the violence of the binary separation of 'we' educators, with its imputation of being located *in* or *out* of an HEI. Surely, the language of partnership invites and challenges us all to be educators for each other.

Foregrounding the language and working in the spirit of partnership in this way, of course opens its own particular challenges for existing cultures and traditions that

historically have sought to define and determine what is signified by 'curriculum' and 'learning'. Hence the *language of partnership* carries with it the challenge of rethinking our traditions in ways that may engage rather than possibly alienate many more young people.

'Question Time', the final session of the conference, provided the opportunity for a panel of experts, with contributions from the floor, to address written questions from delegates that had been prompted by the experience of the conference. Thematically and in concert with the eponymous BBC programme, the aim had been to identify delegates' key concerns and to formulate through such dialogue open consideration on a possible agenda for WBL in 2011. The panel rose to the challenge of some searching questions from the floor and the ensuing dialogue with delegates.

Certainly, in evaluating the conference there had been a 50% response to the electronic feedback link sent to delegates at the end. Of the respondents, 80% had rated the event with a score of 8-10 on what was represented as a scale of excellence. For Ian Jones one of the most gratifying aspects of the conference had been emails from delegates who had been 'galvanised into action' even at the end of a demanding academic year!

Perhaps another measure of the many outcomes from the conference is the range and depth of the papers received that are being published in this journal. For those committed to the principle of learning being emancipatory and empowering – people possibly from business, HEI's and including those 'student-workers and worker-students' who are not in paid employment – there remain difficult questions concerning the language in which we are all variously situated in the name of work based learning. In the sometimes harsh reality of the ideology of 'employment opportunities' the issue of language, which for all of us is our essential home, it is not and has never been an

academic matter, but one directly affecting the livelihoods of individuals and communities.

In the context of a known higher level skills gap in the Tees Valley, the first 'discursive article' in this collection – 'Hybrid HE: Knowledge, Skills and Innovation' – from Ruth Helyer, Dionne Lee and Adrian Evans, opens reflection on what Higher Education may look like in the future, in terms of both 'curriculum and pedagogy'. This paper presents Higher Education with the challenge of helping individuals to learn how to learn and to develop the 'relevant skills required' by business organisations. It does so by directing our attention to 'academic activity and curriculum developments' involving partnership with 'employers and employees in a University's business school in the North East of England'.

The paper makes much of the need for cultural capital in terms of the skills and high order forms of education that constitute the grounds for an innovative workforce and presents the challenge of dialogue and the need for a language which underlines the significance of shared understanding and reciprocal relationships that can be mutually beneficial for all involved. The study makes obvious that 'off the shelf' solutions have little currency with local companies. It illuminates the complexities of the multiplicity of spaces in which any possible learning is situated in the modern workplace and opens questions about the transformations that are now being wrought in the name of the knowledge economy.

But, in keeping in mind that the current market demands people rise to ever higher forms of learning it is perhaps time to ask some deeper questions about the discourses in which we have all become situated. Facing the future is not a matter of ever more assiduously planning the programmable tomorrow; the future is always that unknowable 'monstrous arrivant'. Although this will always be the case, it is perhaps

time to ask more questions about the languages in which we have become situated through discourses of work-based learning.

The next paper in our collection – ‘Innovative curriculum design for work-based learners in medium sized enterprises using e-portfolios’ – by Alison Felce and Emma Purnell, also places an emphasis upon ‘innovation’ and agency. In this case at issue is the agency of an anonymous individual identified as ‘Mary’ who, as an ideological ‘learner’, is involved in a journey using a ‘pensieve’ or e-portfolio conceived metaphorically as an ‘empty room’ to which the individual can add as much or as little as they wish.

Of particular interest is the language used. We were thankful to the authors for challenging a polemical response concerning the hitherto silent voice of language itself. On reflection, we were struck by the resonances a reading of this paper created with an essay read some years ago by a feminist writer, Donna Haraway (1991a), entitled ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’. At the time it had been intended as an ironic examination of the ways in which language is always in danger of being reduced to a technology: merely *one* way of revealing things that emerge in *the world*.

One of the questions the paper raises for me, in addressing itself to the anonymous individual, Mary, is how much does the language of work based learning explored in the paper serve to further alienate those young people who are currently finding themselves on the ‘outside’ of official systems. Indeed, in reading the paper we wondered how much the pedagogic language was used to challenge readers to think about the effects of such discourses upon being-in-the-unique-worlds of human beings. In Basil Bernstein’s (2000: 33) terms pedagogy is not a discourse, but the principle of ‘recontextualisation’. In reflecting on the language of e-portfolios we wonder just how much we are in danger of constituting a form of home for ourselves that is essentially reconstituted as alienating, precisely because it takes no account of the unique world in

which each of us live our lives. The paper appears to me, therefore, as a brilliant provocation for further debate concerning the language mediating the very practices of 'work-based learning'.

The language in the next article in the series presented here addresses what it sees as the 'philosophical and ethical issues in work-based learning educational research' and in so doing also raises more directly further issues regarding the discourses mediating practices of work-based learning. For the author, Elda Nikolou-Walker, who is a Senior Teaching Fellow and Head of Work-based Learning at Queens University, Belfast, it is claimed that the language of positivism has 'played a key role in shaping the landscape of WBL'. In employing 'positivism' as a lens through which to evaluate four recent papers on work-based learning, it too, provides a brilliant provocation to open further debate about the language of positivism as what may appear to some as the natural home for work-based learning.

In a similar way to the previous paper, the unique world of each human being is elided completely in this particular discourse. Instead, implicitly in its language, it holds onto a Platonic ideal. As Stephen J. Gould (1996) suggests in what some have considered to be his controversial account of *The Mismeasure of Man* 'the spirit of Plato dies hard' (ibid: 269). Certainly, his claim that 'we have been unable to escape the philosophical tradition that what we can see and measure in the world is merely the superficial and imperfect representation of an underlying reality' is borne out by the language used in this particular paper (ibid: 269). Again it opens further debate about the languages in which WBL is currently situated.

In drawing a binary distinction between 'interpretivism' as a possible locus for understanding human behaviour and 'positivism' as an approach which 'sought to explain behaviour', implicitly Nikolou-Walker's paper opens further questions and possible debate about, not only our relationship with the language of work-based

learning but also what it means ethically to develop such language. The four papers reviewed by the author in the paper make interesting reading and open their own questions concerning the very nature of language in which we are variously seeking to develop work-based learning.

Similarly, it could be argued that, implicitly, Fran Woodard's and Gordon Weller's paper – 'An Action Research Study of Clinical Leadership, Engagement and Team Effectiveness in Working across NHS Boundaries' – also contains within its language a deeper yearning for that enduring Platonic truth. At issue in this paper is the complex question of the 'characteristics and impact of effective clinical leadership and team effectiveness when working across organisational boundaries' within the NHS.

The authors set out in their study to explore the journey of a patient within the NHS from the point of pre-diagnosis through to treatment. Ordinarily within the NHS this particular journey moves through several inter-related but separate forms of organisation. The authors were interested to find out more about the importance of clinical leadership which might place a focus upon the journey itself rather than what can sometimes be experienced as disparate forms of organisation.

The paper features an interesting action research framework using a single case design because, as Robert Yin (2009) reminds his readers 'a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context and clearly not evident' (ibid: 18). In fact, the authors find from their project that clinicians need 'time and space to initiate inter-organisational working'. Again this opens up questions concerning the coded spaces in the language in which the clinicians are currently working and consulting with their patients. Indeed, how much do such coded spaces currently close down the possibility of hearing the voice of the patient?

In fact, the change project identified in this paper had been directed towards 'improving the whole patient journey'. And, certainly, one of the distinct advantages of discourses of work-based learning is the very possibility they afford for gathering together practices and their mediating discourses from a wide range of settings. In reading this paper with Kevin Flint's background setting in education and philosophy he was very conscious, also, of the hidden dark side of the language of improvement (Flint, 2010a; Peim and Flint, 2009). On reflection the paper opens further questions and the possibility of debate concerning this hidden drive towards a Platonic ideal of an underlying truth in the language of research that, in fact, is always in danger of closing down the coded spaces in which in this case the clinician and the voice of the patient can be heard.

'As work based learning moves on' in their paper – 'Mainstreaming work based learning through practitioner research' – Jenny Shaw, Amelia Rout and Jan Wise work to 'challenge assumptions and practices where necessary'. In the spirit of remaining polemical we open further questions about the language in which practices of work-based learning are set.

This particular paper provides a series of engaging and fruitful insights into practitioner led research. A number of, perhaps, predictable themes emerge in the study, including the issue of 'employer led learning', the challenges of individual, group and network learning, the complex issues surrounding crossing boundaries. The paper makes a strong case for greater sharing of knowledge between practitioners and researchers, which opens the complex issue of dissemination. The authors also open further reflections on the complex and dynamic inter-relationship of what they identify as the 'learner, employer and institution'.

Once again in reflecting critically on the language, Plato is just around the corner in nearly all of the claims made. Given the known complexities of language it seems

almost remarkable that we remain seemingly unable to extricate ourselves from what Derrida (1981: 61-119) called Plato's pharmacy. It is also interesting that the ideological language of the 'learner' is treated so un-problematically in this particular discourse, as if as human beings we are always already disposed to such activity, there being no time for rest, meditation, fun, play and a multiplicity of other possible activities undertaken by actual human beings. In raising the issue of the language of the 'learner' there are connections with Fenwick's (2006: 269-273) paper, but rather than concern ourselves here with the various 'conceptions of learning', at issue are the possibilities of being human of which learning in its multiplicity of forms is just one dimension of possibilities.

In terms of language it also brings us to another related issue, that of 'technological framing' at work and yet manifestly concealed within discourses of lifelong learning. This particular line of critique opens further questions concerning our relationship with being in the various discourses of lifelong learning and indeed work-based learning. Put simply it is a critique that illuminates the possibility of lifelong learning as a means ends driven technology, and as a particular way of revealing, in which many possibilities for human beings are brought into the open, but that also has a dark side to it, in closing down and ordering our ways of being (Peim and Flint, 2009; Flint, 2010a, b; Flint 2011). In being reflexive about the language we are variously drawing on to shape discourses and practices of work-based learning, it seems to us that, perhaps, in the spirit of being eclectic, that infuses the discourse, there is scope for debate around this issue. In other words debate around the issue of the opportunities, the difficulties and the challenges posed by 'the framing'.

In the final paper in this series Liz Marr, Director of the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum at the Open University and Cath Walsh, the Business Growth Programme Manager at Manchester Solutions and Mike Lomas, Director of Business Development and Partnerships at the University of Bolton, open reflections on an innovation in the

sector called 'Advance'. Here is a project 'challenging the structure of higher education to meet the needs of adult work-based learners'.

The authors create a setting for this particular innovation in work-based learning which examines both the complex and sometimes contradictory policy framework for lifelong learning in the workplace and the equally complex and deeply inscribed structures of the university as an institution of higher education. The innovation, 'Advance', that is featured in this paper, emerged from a partnership of universities, further education colleges and work-based learning providers and other stakeholders in 2006 to run a learning network in the north of England. The paper illuminates some of the successes that emerge from such an innovation, not least high quality training and development, and it also includes reference to unforeseen consequences.

In reflecting on the language in which people are variously immersed it is interesting that within the work-based learning discourse there is reference made to 'widening participation' within a new higher education environment. Viewed as essentially a technology, however, deconstruction reveals the dark side to such gathering of populations in the name of lifelong learning. It is the ever present danger of people being reduced to mere 'standing reserve', resources with energy and drives that are available for use within the economy (Peim and Flint, 2009).

On reflection, therefore, over the papers as a whole gathered together in this particular volume, it is a mark of the challenges that are opened by such studies that they have prompted this polemical editorial. It is hoped that in working in this way the various preliminary possibilities explored very briefly here regarding our relationship with the languages of work-based learning will provoke further dialogue and discussion.

We are also delighted to have our first example of a poster for the journal. In a different way this, too, provides a locus for reflection and further polemic that invites further debate concerning the visual language used in a poster presentation.

The poster provides an engaging presentation of a case study which is used to illustrate that 'by leading partners in the development of accredited work based learning programmes, the Centre for Training and Development, CETAD, at Lancaster University supports the transcendence of interdisciplinary boundaries within and between social care and health care'. Case studies, of course, have been for many years open to the criticism of being far too wordy and obscure. One is immediately struck by the way in which the multi-layered complexities of the case are presented in a clear and aesthetically engaging presentation of its essential features.

It is interesting, on reflection, how the requirement of a poster for much less words in this case simply provides sufficient pointers for possible areas of discussion, whilst schematically identifying, seemingly quite straightforwardly just how the different parts of the complex whole inter-relate. As with all poster presentations it opens so many more detailed questions, whilst illuminating the gestalt form of the study. As with the last paper reviewed in this series, the case study illuminates and opens further questions concerning the manifold possibilities of partnership and peoples' experiences of transcending cultural boundaries arising from such a project.

With the 'scopic regime' imposed by the particular form of the poster from any one position, the reader is invited by such a presentation of a case study to examine one particular domain in relation to the other aspects of the study that are juxtaposed in the presentation or even to the case study as a whole. For example, in viewing the key pointers that would appear to be essential ingredients in 'leading a work based learning partnership' one is invited to explore such pointers in relation to both the problems and solutions that have arisen and to the analysis of forces at work within the social milieu

of the workplace. The visual form helps to make ocular connections, the reader is provided with a simulation of reality.

But, one is reminded that this poster is not reality and nor is it unreal, in fact it leaves us in a position where it is no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal. This is an example of Jean Baudrillard's (1988) simulacra, for example, found in the foregoing 'scopic regime' that is dominated by simulations. Clearly there have emerged a whole range of different lines of debate concerning scopic regimes in our post-modern world. At this point we will just open reflection on one particular line of debate. It emerges again from the feminist critique, Donna Haraway. Like many other Haraway (1991b) is concerned with the contemporary proliferation of visualising technologies in scientific and everyday use. For her 'vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspectives give rise to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have to put the myth into everyday practice' (ibid: 189). Again, through Haraway's writing's we are invited to consider, just as the scopic regime in the poster invites us to reflect on, just how certain institutions mobilise particular visual forms to see, and to order the world in a particular way.

From this perspective on visual language, therefore, the implications of such scopic regimes for lifelong learning surely deserve further debate.

We hope that readers enjoy this collection of papers and our first poster and that they help to focus debate further within this distinct field of work based learning.

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