Conceptualising work learning: Exploring the educational discourse on work-based, work-related, and workplace learning

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This paper examines the current educational discourse on work and learning and explores conceptualisations of work-connected learning; in particular, work-based, work-related and workplace learning. It is argued that varying definitions of work-associated learning has led to conceptual confusion in the literature. Through a conceptual analysis of the three terms, current usage is problematized. The term work learning is introduced in the paper as an overarching term that refers to any and all of these three forms of learning. Indeed, it is proposed as an umbrella term for any learning that is connected with some form of work in order to aid discussion. Within this remit, many learning forms can be identified; however, it is argued that there is a need for clarification as current conceptualisations are often conflicting.

Keywords: typology of learning, conceptual analysis, work learning, educational discourse.

Introduction

This paper argues that varying definitions of work-associated learning in education-related literature reflects conceptual confusion. Through a conceptual analysis of the following three terms: workplace learning (WPL), work-based learning (WBL), and work-related learning (WRL), current usage is problematized. The aim of conceptual analysis is 'to illuminate the connections between concepts within a particular form of discourse' (Katz, 2009: 100). For this paper, education-related literature is drawn on to facilitate an exploration of three concepts of learning that are associated with an aspect of work. A problematizing of the employment of these three terms suggests there is a significant need for clarity. The term *work learning* is employed in the paper as an overarching term to collectively refer to the three forms of learning, and to provide a neutral reference mechanism. A model is also proposed to help clarify usage and stimulate further debate.

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The term *work* is situated in various learning practices yet it often leads to confusion and poor differentiation (Moreland, 2005). Conventional definitions of work centre on the mental or physical undertaking of an activity that has a goal (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). However, when used in relation to learning the term is complex and multi-layered. Work can refer to the activity a student undertakes whilst on work experience yet it may also pertain to classroom tasks that, from a student perspective, bears no relation to a workplace. Moreover, the varying implementation of WBL has been previously noted as problematic (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Brennan & Little, 1996; Foster & Stephenson, 1998). Thus, the terms WBL, WRL, and WPL are defined in varying ways and are often used interchangeably, resulting in a complex process that becomes problematic when seeking practical working definitions. Consequently, conflicting conceptualisations can be seen in much of the literature (Moreland, 2005; Nixon et al., 2006).

In a similar manner, the term learning is equally complex, being defined generally as referring to *knowledge acquisition* (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015) and stimulating much philosophical debate in recent years into how this acquisition occurs (see Illeris, 2009). However, not only is there little consensus of meaning when work and learning are combined, there is also evidence of varying conceptualisations, and thus ambiguity, in much of the written discourse around education, such as in academic journals and government policy texts.

Despite their apparent ambiguity and cross-conceptualisation, I argue that WBL, WRL, and WPL should refer to distinct situations in which learning may occur. While 'work' is the shared, and perhaps permanent, element of these practices, the specific nature of each context arguably calls for a distinction in conceptualisation. Hence, WBL is different to WRL and, again, different to WPL (Harris et al*.,* 2001; Qualifications & Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2007). This argument is further problematized as environment situates the learning; thus, WRL in school functions differently to WRL in college. What I am proposing here is not that authors are misusing the terms; rather, that the constructs are not clearly delineated or, indeed, widely accepted.

For the paper, the literature used is education-related and primarily comes from a search of the British Education Index (BEI). In some ways this limits the study; however, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to stimulate academic debate on the use of work learning terms. Second, to explore the educational discourse on WBL, WRL, and WPL, employing the argument that conceptual clarification is needed.

First, I would like to address the reason that is necessary. After all, does it really matter? Should we be differentiating between forms of work learning? Arguably, yes. Clarification helps us to conceptualise learning; thus, helping us to both understand and subsequently analyse cognitive processes. To conjure up a metaphor, the water that flows in an ocean may once have flowed through a sea and a river yet it would perhaps be confusing to suggest that our nomenclature is somehow wrong, and that what currently sits as a river could be described as an ocean. For conceptual clarity, then, it is important to illustrate where the river ends, to define that particular body of water, and thus to 'make the waters of serious educational discourse less opaque' (Katz, 2009: 100). As such, work learning is proposed in this paper as an overarching term to provide a neutral reference for learning that has a work connection. In this way, it is argued that the term decreases the possibility for misconception, and term overuse, of WBL, WRL and WPL by facilitating the discussion to arrive at more accurate conceptualisations for each. Thus, each term can clearly refer to a specific activity to avoid ambiguity.

Conceptual analysis

Petocz and Newbery (2010: 126) define conceptual analysis as 'analysis of concepts, terms, variables, constructs, definitions, assertions, hypotheses, and theories.' In line with this thinking, this paper draws on conceptual analysis to facilitate linguistic clarity and to 'eliminate conceptual confusion (Katz, 2009: 100)' in order to identify 'what we claim to be thinking and talking *about*' (Petocz and Newbery, 2010: 126). According to Beaney (2014), the modern form of conceptual analysis has its roots in ancient Greek geometry, particularly as an influence on Socrates and his interest in definition. However, I do not seek to argue here that the aim is to capture 'truth'; merely, my aim is to facilitate a clearer understanding

through concurred usage and thus to reach a consensual acceptance of work-associated learning.

The discourse of work learning

Guile & Griffiths (2001) suggest that work operates as the context through which learning can occur. However, the manner in which this learning is conceptualised can aid our understanding of how the work element functions. For instance, Akkerman & Bakker (2012: 154) state that 'apprenticeships have been rediscovered as workplace learning trajectories that are theoretically interesting as a way to overcome boundaries between school and work' and in their paper they go on to use the terms WBL, vocational learning and apprenticeships to refer to the same aspect of learning. When defining learning in an environment connected to work, then, the employment of varying terminology can lead to conceptual confusion as a workplace may be a place of employment that includes paid or unpaid work such as work experience which, from a school perspective, has been defined as WRL (QCA, 2007).

Hager (2004: 3) notes that 'much writing on workplace learning is strongly shaped by the people's understandings of learning in formal educational situations. Such assumptions distort attempts to understand learning at work.' Thus, the educational setting can be a significant factor of perception. The workplace, for instance, may facilitate co-constructed learning, wherein colleagues can be on hand to give advice (Billett, 2001). However, this can vary widely from an institution such as a college that is more aligned to a didactic approach. Moreover, the workplace alone may, in many situations, offer merely limited experience and support (Billett, 2010). As such, Akkerman & Bakker (2012: 154) suggest that a working environment and an educational institution 'mutually contribute to learning processes.' While learning can occur anywhere, and as such may involve instruction and/or an exploratory approach, the environment itself can prompt a more responsive attitude to learning.

Schools and colleges are often described as environments for both vocational and academic activities, whereas the workplace has been seen as facilitating informal and mostly vocational learning. However, academic learning is a crucial aspect of many WBL

programmes and may include an understanding of a possible theoretical underpinning of the learning that occurs on the job – i.e., an employee, or student, may align the learning with academic discourse or theory. Further, the environment can also vary from an actual workplace to a simulated work environment, such as a training provider, where an individual may practise a trade. Conceptualising work learning, then, can be problematic and what may be defined as vocational in one context may actually involve great interplay between vocational and academic. Consequently, many learning typologies are confusing and terms such as vocational have been conceptualised as WRL, WBL, and/or WPL (Compare: Richardson, 1998; Stasz & Brewer, 1998; QCA, 2007; Raelin, 2008). From this, we can see that conceptual confusion has permeated a wide variety of literature, including academic papers and government policy texts. Thus, clearly defining the type of activity is arguably an important factor of understanding work-connected learning from many perspectives.

Typologising work learning

Learning is often identified as either formal or informal (Billett, 2002). However, forms of work learning often refer to multiple types. For example, Virtanen et al. (2014) employ the terms WBL, WRL, vocational, and WPL in their reference to students studying a variety of vocational courses. However, they do vary their conceptualisation of learning at work, depending on whether it involves students – wherein, it is 'the main purpose of their WPL periods' – or employees, in which case it 'may be a by-product that accompanies normal work' (ibid: 44). WPL is described as 'unplanned and implicit, often collaborative, highly contextualised, and leading to unpredictable learning outcomes' (ibid: 45) which suggests that it is mostly informal. As such, an employee using their workplace to facilitate learning for a specific learning purpose – such as a course – may cause us to reconceptualise the learning process as work-based. Indeed, Little (2006: 2) categorises WBL as being 'learning that is derived specifically from doing a job of work and taking on a workplace role.' However, this can result in a nebulous understanding of how learning can vary, depending on factors such as environment and perception.

Conceptions of learning at work include an involvement in the work itself, a colleague-cooperative approach, formal learning, and social interactions (Pillay et al., 2003). The

emphasis here is primarily WPL yet there is an essential component that we can glean from it that informs our knowledge of other forms of work learning. Cooperative learning and colleague interactions form the basis for problem-solving as a team, and work relationships are built around this, particularly where social interaction is viewed as an important feature of work learning (Collin & Valleala, 2005).

According to the Higher Education Academy (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2008:4), WBL in higher education is aimed at employment, and employees are encouraged 'to become serious lifelong learners.' However, WBL is also often employed for vocational programmes for schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2008; Hall & Raffo, 2004) and reflects learning *for* work. Moreover, many of these programmes draw on actual workplaces as well as simulated work learning providers and this can create cross-conceptualisation with WBL, WPL, WRL, and even work experience.

Nixon et al. (2006) also refer to WBL as workforce development and identify three elements: learning that complements a job, learning *for* a job (training, for example, for work in that area), and learning in a place of work. In this way, WPL may be argued as an element of WBL. However, the QCA (QCA, 2003: 4) also define WRL as learning *for, through* and *about* work as it involves, 'Planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work.' However, while this is helpful in some respects, a similar conceptualisation has been applied to WBL, wherein it is noted as an overarching term for learning *for*, *at* and *in* work (Seagraves et al., 1996). Further conceptual confusion can be seen in the Tomlinson Report (2004) with its reference to *WBL*, *work-based training*, and *WRL* to describe the same phenomenon: learning *for* and *through* work in the 14–19 arena. This includes college-based learning, WBL providers, and work placements.

Such forms of learning, then, may be better understood linguistically as clearly defined learning processes.

As we have seen, I have proposed the term *work learning* to encompass the various forms of learning connected with work or work practices such as WBL, WRL and WPL as the conceptualisation of these terms is often varied and unclear. This is purely for an overall discussion of all three terms, it is not my intention to categorise them as *one* learning form. Rather, work learning displays a variety of methods that share a key aspect. The specific focus here – the work element – illustrates the confusion surrounding the various forms (Pillay et al*., 2003).

Methodology

This paper presents a critical exploration, and conceptual analysis, of the terms WBL, WRL, and WPL in recent education-related literature, including academic journal articles, practitioner guides, and government policy. The analysis is based on the following research questions:

- How are terms such as WBL, WRL and WPL conceptualised?
- What is the *work* element referring to in these terms?

In 2004, Moreland's (2005: 2) search for 'work-related learning' found that there was much interchangeability with WBL and/or experiential learning. A literature search carried out for this paper over ten years later illustrates that the situation remains and WBL and WRL are thus problematic terms. The variety of work learning conceptualisations proved to be of interest as they highlighted controversy in current (agreed) knowledge of how learning and work operate together (see DCSF, 2008; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006; Hall & Raffo, 2004; Raffo, 2003).

The theoretical basis for this paper is influenced by conceptual analysis and draws on the argument that it is an important factor for the collective understanding of linguistic expressions (Jackson, 1998; Katz, 2009; Petocz and Newbery, 2010). In particular, the paper explores various discourses – such as those employed in academic and policy literature – in an attempt to identify semantic connections between work and learning (Katz, 2009: 100).

Research limitations

The aim of this analysis is to identify, and begin to unpick, current conceptualisations of WBL, WRL and WPL; thus, it presents a somewhat narrow focus in that other terms are not included; for instance, vocational learning and training. However, this paper merely aims to initiate a discussion of the three work learning terms by proposing clearer conceptual forms, with a view to these forms being tested for robustness in various contexts.

Findings and discussion

The work learning model

In order to clarify the conceptual confusion, we could consider work learning as a tiered, albeit non-hierarchical, system (see figure 1) to both illustrate conceptual stages, such as from school to the workplace, and to illustrate the more general nature of WRL. In the model, the three terms function as separate conceptual forms, although there is an overarching interrelatedness that makes the journey appear progressive.

Figure 1. Work learning model
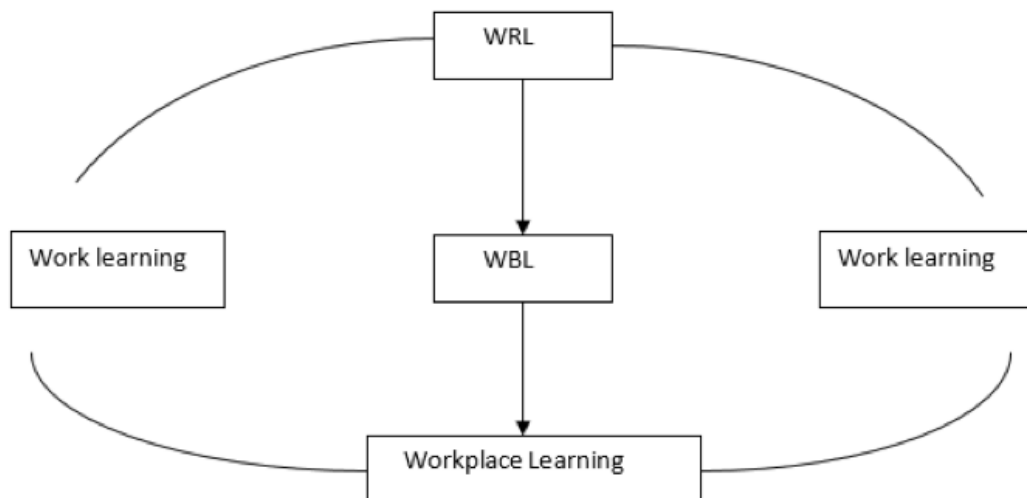
At present, WPL is subsumed within WBL which in turn is subsumed within WRL, while the proposed work learning acts in an overarching manner. To exemplify the conceptual differences, however, we could view each work learning term in the following manner:

- WRL – preparation for, or learning about, work (for instance, school-based projects such as identifying skills for employability, job searching, and CV writing)
- WBL – a structured programme of learning where work skills are practised, or experienced, in a work-like environment (attached to a learning programme/course and may involve a simulated working environment such as a private training provider where a qualification is undertaken)
- WPL – learning as an employee (includes work experience as the young person is effectively employed for a short period).

The model suggests that while work learning terms may be influential upon each other, they are better conceptualised as distinct learning processes. In this way, there is still an identifiable path of conceptualisation from school to the workplace but it is incremental. At present, however, the three terms are in a state of flux and thus in need of conceptual stabilisation. For instance, actual working environments (workplaces) are used for both work experience and to support WBL programmes, resulting in cross-conceptualisation of the learning processes. As such, it may be difficult to identify what type of activity is occurring. While this may problematize distinctive terms, the term work learning can encompass such cross-conceptualisations, and thus illustrate the complexity, by functioning as an overarching reference mechanism. However, while this aids the discussion, the terms within this typology remain in need of clear conceptualisation. For instance, WRL is argued as comprising three components:

1. Vocational learning for the unemployed
2. Continuing professional development (CPD)
3. The situating of oneself within the labour market (Illeris, 2003; Moreland, 2005).

Clear from this is the range of definitions that may be applied to a single term. The first point (vocational learning) takes into account school programmes that address training for work or work learning for a specific job, but this has also been labelled WBL and WRL (DCSF, 2008; Hall & Raffo, 2004). (Interestingly, in their second edition of their WRL guide in 2009, the DCSF removed all references to WBL.) The second element of CPD could

either fall into Raelin's (2008) category of WBL or may refer to learning activities undertaken in a work environment (WPL).

In other contexts, WRL is depicted as preparation for work, such as school-based activities, as opposed to occurring in work (QCA, 2003) and thus has an academic attachment (Brennan & Little, 1996), particularly where qualifications are sought. However, the former schools- and family-related government department suggested that WRL 'covers a wide range of activities, including enterprise education and work experience placements' (DCSF, 2009: 10). Moreover, two years prior to this the same department had identified 'the most visible example of work-related learning [as being] work experience' (DCSF, 2007: 11).

Interchangeable terms, arising ambiguity

Ebbutt (1996) argues that WBL comprises four features:

- *Access or Accelerated Access*
- *Initial Professional Preparation*
- *General Preparation for the 'Real World'*
- *The Major Constituent of a Programme of Study*

To elaborate, we could view these as,

- *Access or Accelerated Access:* the development of a core career base or CV. Reconstructive skills (also viewed as transferable skills)
- *Initial Professional Preparation:* knowledge preparation for the workplace
- *General Preparation for the 'Real World':* development of self, contextualised within the working community and society
- *The Major Constituent of a Programme of Study:* development of own work/job/employment. The practical side of the learning. Problem-based learning.

Ebbut is suggesting that WBL does not necessarily involve the workplace; rather, it can involve work-simulated environments whereupon a base of reusable (or reconstructive) skills may be acquired. Raelin (2008), however, claims that WBL occurs *in* the workplace and thus does not differentiate between WBL and WPL. Such interchangeability can problematize understanding, particularly where no differentiation exists between employees undertaking a course in their actual workplace and students utilising a workplace to fulfil the so-called WRL criteria as part of their course. Moreover, a student may be offered work in this environment, leading to a potential dichotomy of engaging in WBL and learning in a workplace (WPL). Confusingly, then, WBL is argued as both learning *for* work (Ebbutt) and learning *in* work (Brennan & Little, 1996; Nixon et al*.,* 2006; Raelin, 2008).

Raelin's allusion, it appears, is that of paid employment and a major focus of his use of WBL is concerned with employee training and development, often referred to as learning 'on the job.' However, if we accept this it becomes an all-encompassing term that arguably needs clarification. To add to the complexity, Moreland (2003) argues for a separation between workplace learning and work experience, wherein work experience is part of WRL (Moreland, 2003). Thus, it appears that work learning is currently perceived to operate as a continuum where the three aspects (WBL, WRL, WPL) are strongly overlapping. Conceptually, however, this is of little use.

One significant factor for differentiation, perhaps, lies in teaching. In the workplace, learning can occur without guidance and may be tacit; however, teaching can reconfigure an environment, whereupon learning opportunities are artificially created to mimic a workplace (Zanibbi et al*.,* 2006). In a simulated work environment, for instance, learners develop specific skills and practise reconstructing them in situations that typify an actual workplace. Further, employees can engage in WPL in their workplace yet when this is attached to an academic institution – i.e., formalised – it may be regarded as WBL. Conceptual confusion can further arise where other similar actions are defined interchangeably. For example, students undertaking vocational study as part of their schooling may see their activities conceptualised as WBL (Hall & Raffo, 2004) or WRL (DCSF, 2007; QCA, 2003; Raffo, 2003). Moreover, if the learning occurs in a college/university environment and not in the workplace, we could argue that the work is not *based*, but

rather *related*, as the environment is academically related, somewhat 'controlled,' and merely mimics a real working environment.

The learning setting

The following four environments illustrate the potential for a variety of work learning activities:

1. Workplace (may be paid or unpaid employment: conceptualised as WPL and/or WBL)
2. Setting for a work experience placement (conceptualised as WBL and/or WRL)
3. Work-simulated environment (private training provider: conceptualised as WBL and/or WRL)
4. Educational institution (developing work-associated knowledge: conceptualised as WRL and/or WBL)

These varied environments can have an impact on whether learning is considered to be work-based, work-related, or workplace. For instance, a college or university is often referred to as work-based, yet many re-engagement programmes aimed at key stage 4 students (14-16) also adopt this term, wherein allocations are made to private training providers (See Allan, 2014). Furthermore, work experience placements will involve schools allocating a school student into a workplace where the occurrence of learning is conceptualised in government policy texts as WRL for this young person (DCSF, 2007), yet defined in academic literature as WPL for the employees (Coetzer, 2007). In addition, an employee may decide to undertake an academic course that relies on utilising their place of employment for learning and this has been conceptualised as WBL (Brennan & Little, 1996), regardless of the argument that it is potentially a very similar learning experience to WPL. Thus, the distinction is nebulous.

Between 2004 and 2012, WRL was a compulsory element of key stage 4 provision (Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], 2005) and the broad manner of meeting this requirement ranged from CV writing and job searching to industry-related learning. As such, the work-simulated environments in point three were used to prepare students for employment and involved the practising of skills for reconstruction in the workplace

(Saunders, 2006). To problematize the picture, however, such environments vary widely and can include academic institutions (college, university), specialist training providers, actual workplaces (work experience), and even virtual worlds. In this way, WRL has been defined broadly to incorporate many learning activities.

It could be argued, then, that the terms WBL, WRL and WPL can be used interchangeably as the central focus is learning itself; however, I believe that this generates ambiguity. Boud & Solomon (2003), for instance, note that when some *workers* are labelled as *learners* they demonstrate confusion over their status, while Akkerman & Bakker (2012: 156) similarly point out that, **'**Apprentices find themselves in an ambiguous position, being a student and novice who is learning, yet at the same time a professional who is expected to know and act.' Clarification of usage, therefore, can help individuals to identify with the type of work learning that they are undertaking as activities may include several work-connected conceptualisations, and individual identities may be unclear.

Tacit learning

It has been argued that learning in the workplace can occur through colleague interaction and task engagement (Felstead et al*.,* 2005; Boud & Middleton, 2003) and this can also relate to WBL. However, a small distinction can be made and in order to exemplify this I would like to generalise learning in order to note typical behaviours. Workplace learning can draw on subconscious, and/or tacit, knowledge, particularly when a task is undertaken by an *experienced* employee (Paré & Maistre, 2006). As such, an individual may undertake a task regularly and may not perceive learning as taking place if they believe that they are merely using their existing skills. Consequently, learning may only significantly occur when there is a change in context, such as an unexpected turn of events or when a skill needs adapting; thus, the difference may remain unidentified because the learning is nuanced. For instance, observations are central to the process of learning in the workplace yet such actions can go unacknowledged (Coetzer, 2007).

For WBL, however, I would argue that whilst learning a trade and holding the distinct role of *learner*, the student is (for the most part) aware of, and consciously contributes to, learning. To further exemplify this I draw on Lev Vygotsky. Work-based learners may perceive a

colleague or supervisor as representative of an instructor, or more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978); thus, they succumb to the process of learning and more readily acknowledge it. Arguably, then, a distinction between WBL and WPL is needed.

Conclusion

The interchangeable use of WBL, WRL, and WPL has arguably resulted in conceptual confusion and problematic implementation is an ongoing discussion point (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Brennan & Little, 1996; Foster & Stephenson, 1998; Hager, 2004). Consequently, the lack of clarity results in our reduced understanding of the potentially varying processes of learning, and our inability to sustain a tenable definition. Work learning is an overarching concept and thus provides a neutral reference mechanism for the varying conceptual forms within.

While the conceptual delineation of the three terms is by no means straightforward, I argue that it is necessary both for clarification of the differing learning processes that are occurring, and to provide grounds for conceptualising an individual learner's identity and status. Despite the number of proposed frameworks for understanding the various terms, there is unfortunately much disharmony. Academics, policy makers and practitioners often juxtapose the definitions of WBL, WRL and workplace learning (Goddard & Greenwood, 2007) and it appears that new definitions of WBL are still occurring (Zemblyas, 2006).

The term work learning functions as a generic, umbrella term to encompass a variety of learning occurrences that are connected to work and therefore facilitates a clearer analysis and debate. Learning and work are often viewed as separate entities yet in many ways they are interrelated: workers can engage in education whilst at work and learners can indulge in work through their schooling. Furthermore, types of work learning are arguably many and varied. Work learning can occur, then, in many situations. For instance, in the workplace (the employee's place of work), in a work-based provider (such as a key stage 4 engagement programme), in an educational setting (through a work-related activity such as a vocational programme or college-based course, or merely pupils searching for vacancies), as part of an apprenticeship (both in a place of employment and/or an academic environment), or as part of work experience, to name but a few. Therefore, I strongly argue that the world of work

learning is highly complex and learning processes within this world are in need of clarification.

In the education-related literature, the various work learning activities can be seen through both confusing and conflicting usage. WBL has been argued as existing in the workplace (Raelin, 2008) yet many key stage 4 engagement programmes draw on simulated work environments under the label of WBL (see Allan, 2014; Hall & Raffo, 2004). Moreover, such programmes are often expounded in government policy documents, wherein they are defined as WRL (DCSF, 2007), regardless of whether they involve work-simulated environments or actual workplaces. Sharper conceptualisations, then, will not only improve our understanding, but will help us to better identify the learning processes that are occurring when learning has some form of work connection. Thus, it is hoped that this brief analysis provides a foundation for clearer conceptualisations of the three terms, with a view to stimulating further debate in what I believe is an important quest for conceptual clarification of terms within work learning.

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