

## Reflection on Work Based Learning

Since beginning my career in work based learning I have experienced learning and teaching in many different formats. I began with teaching small groups and one to one coaching, before moving to large group induction training. In the last number of years I have become more involved in e-learning, assisting with the implementation of Moodle as a Learning Management System (LMS) in the organisation I work for and with the development of asynchronous e-learning modules. Now I'm about to move to another format as the organisation introduces virtual classroom technology. The changes in my career reflect the transition the organisation has made from face to face training to a more blended approach. The scenarios and formats I have experienced have each brought their own challenges and issues. This reflection aims to try to define what work based learning is and the challenges faced by work based learners.

There is a challenge in understanding what work based learning is. Stanley (2012) suggests it is not a "conventional subject" (p.1), as it is not supported by an established group of speciality teachers and it is not backed up by text books, while Boud and Solomon (2001) suggest it is a "disturbing practise" (p.225) disturbing the perception of academic identity and setting. Jennings (2011) describes it as a "messy business" that differs from one organisation to another and from one person to another. Boud and Garrick (1999) contend there is no single way to understand learning at work. They argue the need for multiple perceptions arises from the wide range of job roles that exist, the differences that exist even within a single organisation and because learning in work is complex. Linehan (2008) agrees, simply stating that there is no straightforward definition of what work based learning entails other than it is about learning rather than teaching and occurs in the workplace instead of on campus. There are definitions that have arisen from workgroups on the subject, one such definition is "that learning which derives its purpose from the context of employment", Sutherland (as cited in Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird, & Unwin 2006 p. 7). Evans et al (2006) comment that this goes beyond training which focusses on the current need of the learner and the business and iterate that it involves "learning in through and for the workplace"(p. 7). This notion

relates to Boud's (2001) suggestion that the characteristic defining work based learning is the fact that working and learning influence each other. Learning interventions are influenced by the nature of work and in turn work is influenced by what is learnt. Marsick and Watkins (1999) argue that because work based learning is more than a simple educational intervention there has been a development of the concept of work based learning that incorporates knowledge of pedagogy, organisation behaviour and culture. Boud (2001) summarises the differences that exist in context which drive the developments of these concepts. They are not just learner differences such as different backgrounds and levels of knowledge but also different workplaces with different demands on workers and different expectations of outcomes. Boud and Garrick (1999) argue that to come to an understanding of work based learning means to recognise the complexities, rival interests and the individual, political and organisational influences that affect it. Furthermore they contend that learning at work should be regarded as not just the basis to improve performance and develop knowledge but a matter of the "situated ethics" (p3) of what is being learnt and the learner.

We have seen that work based learning can be difficult to define, but what of the challenges that face work place learners as they strive to learn in such a complex context. Boud and Garrick (1999) argue that there are few places left in the workplace for employees at any level who do not continue to learn. Illeris (2011) agrees and advises that the pace of development and the level of constant change place adults in circumstances where skills development is the only way forward. Employees may be unwilling to change or learn but Barnett (1999) suggests that eventually this will catch up with them, Illeris (2011) proposes the view that learning is something that cannot be avoided exerts pressure and places a burden on the learner. In this context where employees seem to have no choice but to engage in work based learning Illeris (2011) suggests that employees often have no concept of their learning needs but Boud (2001) contends that work based learners need to take a proactive stance and develop into an active learner. This concept of the need to be an active learner is echoed by Matthews and Candy (1999) who posit the effective work based learner is proactively seeking out opportunities for learning and anticipating the future changes that may occur in the work place. Just as Stanley (2012) proposes that work based learning is not a "conventional subject" (p. 1), Boud also points to this lack of convention with regard to the boundaries that exist

between work and learning for employees (2001). He suggests the roles of worker and learner are not compatible (2001) and like Linehan (2008) highlights the need for workers to switch constantly between the both roles. The constant need to adjust means workers may not be able to dedicate themselves to one role or the other Boud (2001). Barnett (1999) draws attention to the personal and intellectual challenges of the work based learner. He contends learning is “unsettling” (p. 35) in personal terms arguing that to admit to being a learner is to admit to being uncertain which can be particularly unsettling in learning situations given by or in the company of junior colleagues. He describes learning challenges as “supercomplex” (p. 38) proposing they demand the learner to acquire new techniques, ideas and practises which in turn demands the learner to change personally. Barnett acknowledges that learners can find these demands so great they can find it difficult to adopt them. As we have seen workers must face the fact that learning is part of working life. Perhaps it could be argued that the greatest competency a worker could have is not one that is learnt but one that is inherent. Casey (1999) states that workers must be able to learn and Matthews and Candy (1999) agree that this ability to learn is regarded as a fundamental competency which will distinguish the successful work based learner from the unsuccessful.

In dealing with such complexities I have searched for a framework that could be used to optimise training opportunities for learners and the organisation. Evans et al (2006) suggest the improvement of workplace learning requires an analysis of what is currently provided and the structures and regulatory framework within which it takes place, along with an understanding of how workers learn as individuals and collectively. Jennings (2011) and Jarcho (2012) both point to the move to informal learning as the area where real learning takes place. However Jarcho (2012) contends that there is no one formal methodology to encourage informal learning and there shouldn't be. Jennings (2011) on the other hand proposes the 70 – 20 – 10 model where 70% of what is learnt is through experience, 20% through other people and only 10% in a formal classroom setting. But again he warns against using the framework without adapting it to the context of the organisation. Marsick and Watkins (1999) discuss four metaphorical lenses through which an organisation may be viewed and examine the learning implications for managers, employees and human resource development. They acknowledge that analysis of an organisation

assumes that the organisation falls clearly under one metaphor, which may well not be the case in real life. In some organisations all metaphors may be in operation in different parts simultaneously. Their solution is to start with the prevailing metaphor and move towards one that allows a higher level of learning. Their advice is something that can be acted upon, providing insight why training interventions may have been successful in some parts of the organisation and not in others. The message is clear; there is no one framework or no one methodology which will provide the answer I am looking for. Rather the answer lies in raising awareness of the variations in context culture and individuals I have discussed here and tailoring an appropriate solution.

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