

New questions about work and learning

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Chair of Symposium:

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From some point in the new century, a new generation of researchers will look back and recognise that the closing years of the old prefigured in various ways the transformation of the ‘old’ world of adult and vocational education as it was understood for much of the twentieth century. They will recognise perhaps, in the rise of ‘work-based learning’ in the 1990s, a wave of radical change in specialised institutions dedicated to formal learning, the collapse of boundaries between the domains of ‘adult’ and ‘vocational’ education and a hegemonic shift to the enterprise as a key site of learning.

This symposium, members of a key research group at the University of Technology Sydney will explore new questions that are emerging around this hegemony of the workplace as a site of adult learning. The research group, most of whom will be at the conference, have worked together collaboratively as the ‘researching adult vocational learning’ group at UTS (a key university research group designated by this university) with the aim of bringing disparate perspectives to bear on questions of work and learning - perspectives from philosophy, developmental psychology, cultural theory, adult learning, policy sociology and history of education. Two books developed from the work of the group (edited by Boud & Solomon and Symes & McIntyre) are being published by Open University Press in 2000.

The objectives of the symposium are to:

- to demonstrate that work-based learning is a key site for investigating the transformation of adult and vocational learning institutions at the end of the century
- to promote debate and discussion about the questions that need to be explored and to set directions for researching work and learning

David Boud and Nicky Solomon will examine the pedagogical implications of ‘work as the curriculum’ and argue that these questions about work and learning find sharp expression in the development of work-based learning awards, which present a radical re-definition of what constitutes a university education and university-level learning. In such programs learners study for a degree or a diploma primarily in their workplace, through activities that arise from their everyday work activities. Academics are struggling with the pedagogical implications of the learning of non-disciplinary knowledge as their role as an expert knower and subject authority in a disciplinary area is displaced by roles that involve facilitation of learning and the

interpretation of new conceptions of academic standards and values. In this paper we examine the pedagogical relationships that are emerging through academics' engagement with the teaching and learning of new kinds of local and specific knowledge that is not disciplinary-based but is derived from the context of application. We outline features of new forms of pedagogy and explore the tensions they create in the academy.

Colin Symes will argue that our new preoccupation with work and learning represents a crisis of formal institutions, in whose shadow adult education has non-formally prospered until recently. Universities are at a pivotal point in their history and are undergoing dramatic changes. Like many areas of the public sphere, they have been subject to budget cuts and encouraged to privatise many of their activities. One measure of their changed direction, is the degree to which universities have forged alliances with business and industry to extend their revenue basis. Developing an historical account of the modern university, he argues that the liberal university has been superseded by the vocationalised university, and that the primary justification for its existence now rests on servicing the needs of human capital. Although some have seen this as lamentable development transgressing all that is valued in the academy, it can be argued that universities in following a philosophy of education in which theory and application complement one another are in fact embarking upon a radical approach to learning.

Clive Chappell explores some ways in which new questions about work and learning are disrupting our categories of knowledge and learning. The identities of learners and educational practitioners are challenged by contemporary discourses that, in one way or another, disturb traditional ideas about what counts as knowledge. Many of these new discourses unsettle modern understandings of knowledge by reversing the traditional binaries that privilege one form of knowledge over its 'other'. Today, epistemological discourses appear to privilege knowledge constructed as practical, interdisciplinary, informal, applied and contextual over knowledge constructed as theoretical, disciplinary, formal, foundational and generalisable. Or as Gibbons (1994) and Luke (1996) propose, there is a significant shift in emphasis away from 'culturally concentrated' (academic) knowledge to 'socially distributed' knowledge. While there is considerable discussion over why this shift in emphasis has come about there has as yet been very little focus on the consequences of this discursive shift for the identities of learners and educational practitioners. Yet, learners and educational practitioners are in no small measure constructed by and through knowledge discourses. Furthermore, the different institutional sites in which learners and educational practitioners undertake their knowledge work are also constructed and reconstructed by these same discourses. His paper examines the identities of learners and educational practitioners in order to surface what enabling and constraining effects the new knowledge discourses have on people's sense of who they are in the learning project.

Mark Tennant's contribution will be to outline his interest in understanding how the changing nature of education and its interface with the workplace produces, presupposes or otherwise shapes new teacher/learner identities and pedagogical practices, and ultimately what it means to be a 'good' learner or teacher. Current ideas about the contemporary workforce have led to the expectation that both formal education and workplace training should produce adaptable and flexible learners.

Universities are reconfiguring themselves within a lifelong learning framework, with a focus on learning rather education, workplace problems rather than traditional disciplines, and a recognition of multiple (re)entry points and sites of learning across the lifespan. Within this context new partnerships between universities and public and private sector organisations have emerged, highlighting 'learning in the workplace' and bringing about a wholesale changes in what it means to have a 'worker' or learner' identity. Hence, analysis needs to examine how teachers and learners engage with new forms of what may be termed 'self work' of self reflection, self appraisal and the like.

John McIntyre will argue for the necessity of a policy perspective in understanding why it is that formal education institutions are locating learning in the workplace, in ways not simply equated to 'informal learning in the workplace' or to industry training. The focus of the analysis is a reconfiguration of vocational institutions that is tantamount a 'de-schooling' of vocational knowledge, on the one hand, and on the other, a new sphere of institutionalisation of adult learning. At the same time, this makes necessary a new analysis of vocational learning that takes into account changes in contemporary knowledge formation. Thus work-based learning is seen as representing a wave of fundamental changes being wreaked upon vocational institutions, not only by government acting on political agendas to reduce or extract more value from public expenditures, but also by forces of globalisation acting to restructure the economy and the nature of learning for work. At the same time, there are the responses of the vocational institutions themselves to both 'education and training reform' and to social and economic impacts of globalisation. This change has the capacity to disrupt and overturn our conventional notions of the differences between 'adult education' and other forms of institutionalised learning activity, and much else.

Enterprises, flexibility

Work, economy, work-based learning, RAVL, Researching Adult and Vocational Learning group, de-schooling, vocational knowledge, identify, policy

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