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Terry Hyland
University of Bolton, t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk

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WORK-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMMES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Terry Hyland
Faculty of Arts, Science & Education
Bolton Institute
Chadwick St.
Bolton BL2 1JW
[t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk]
Abstract

The twin pillars supporting contemporary lifelong learning theory in Britain – and also to some extent in the US, Europe and Australasia (Field & Leicester, 2000) – are the development of vocational skills for economic competitiveness and the fostering of social inclusion and cohesion. Clear and direct links are made between inclusion and economic prosperity in the ‘vision of a society where high skills, high rewards and access to education and training are open to everyone’ (DfEE, 2001, p.6). However, although this policy does, to some degree, represent a break with the rampant neo-liberalism of the 1980s and 1990s in Britain (Hyland, 2002) – underpinned by ‘third way’ values which emphasise ‘economic efficiency and social cohesion’ (Giddens, 2000, p.78) – the concept of economic capital always takes pride of place and there is a real danger that the social capital objectives of contemporary British vocational education and training (VET) may be neglected in the obsession with economic competitiveness. Since work-based learning (WBL) is now a central element in all current VET policy initiatives, it is suggested that attention to the systematic management and support of learning on WBL programmes can go some way towards achieving the important social objectives of lifelong learning.
Vocational Reform in Britain

Esland (1990) observed that – although VET issues have remained high on the political agenda since the 1970s oil crisis, economic recession and mass youth unemployment – the British State’s response has typically been one of ‘crisis management…giving rise to schemes and initiatives designed to limit the social damage which followed de-industrialisation’ (p.v). More recently, in introducing the flagship University for Industry (now Ufi Learndirect) blueprint, Hillman (1997) remarked that:

Deficiencies in British education and training have been a cause for concern for policy-makers for 150 years. Partly in response to world-wide recognition of the importance of lifelong learning, there has been a flurry of reforms in the last ten years. The result has been an array of short-term and narrowly focused initiatives which have confused rather than clarified the situation for the learner (pp.29-30).

Amongst the ‘flurry of reforms’ were the many schemes associated with the ‘new vocationalism’ (Hyland, 1999) of the 1980s: the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, Youth Training Schemes, National Vocational Qualifications, Training Credits and Training and Enterprise Councils. Only time will tell whether the post-1997 New Labour reforms in this sphere – Ufi Learndirect, New Deal Welfare to Work programmes, Learning and Skills Councils and the re-organisation of 14-19 learning programmes and qualifications – will help to solve the perennial problems of British VET.

What can be said with some certainty is that the emphasis on upgrading and enhancing vocational studies – whether at the 14-19 stage or in post-compulsory education and training (PCET) in general – has never been so high on the political agenda in Britain. In setting out the policy template and mission for PCET in the 21st century, the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, complained about the problem of having ‘to contend with an elitist academic culture which has failed to value technical study and attainment’ (DfEE, 2000a, para.36). More recently, the former Secretary of State, Estelle Morris, declared that we:

should no longer tolerate a culture that devalues vocational learning and squanders the talent of too many young people. I want to see a vocational renaissance that captures the imagination of young people and challenges prejudice (DfES, 2002, p.1)

Workplace learning – and especially conceptions of WBL typified by its natural home and paradigm instance in the context of apprenticeship – is placed centre stage in the current reform programme, and there is a clear statement that the ‘development of a world-class vocational system ultimately rests on the quality of the
apprenticeship system’ (DfEE,2001a,para.30). The newly reconstructed Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are accorded a pivotal role in the emerging ‘national skills agenda’ in which ‘learning and skills are the bedrock of social justice and economic prosperity’ (DfEE,2000b,para.60).

The Rise of Work-Based Learning
WBL has always been an essential feature of VET programmes though, arguably, it has never been accorded the prominence it now has in both Europe and Australia (Symes & McIntyre,2000). In Britain, high quality ‘work-based training is at the heart of the Government’s 14-19 agenda’ (DfES,2001,p.2) and integral to all contemporary VET policy developments. WBL – described by Boud & Symes (2000) as ‘an idea whose time has come’ and an ‘acknowledgement that work…is imbued with learning opportunities’(pp.14-15) – has emerged as one of the key features of VET reforms as systems respond to the demands of global competition and the knowledge economy. Its essential characteristics are derived from a number of sources connected with the learning organisation, the integration of theory and practice in workplace knowledge and skills, and the need to respond positively to the challenges of knowledge creation in the light of the information technology revolution and global economic developments.

As Marsick & Watkins (2002) put it, the ‘rapidly changing world in which we have been living is giving birth to a host of new ways of understanding work, jobs, organisations, technology and change’(p.34). The basic theoretical premiss is that ‘the workplace is a crucially important site for learning and for access to learning’ (Evans, Hodkinson & Unwin,2002,p.1). This is especially true for public service professions such as nursing and teaching where continuing professional development (CPD) is an integral feature of pre- and inservice learning programmes. It is worth emphasising that the new developments in WBL imply that CPD should be understood as a paradigm form of VET in which the workplace becomes a central site for professional and developmental learning of all kinds (Avis, Bathmaker & Parsons,2001). In this respect the current DfES drive to raise standards in learning and teaching in further and higher education (DfES,2002c) can be seen as forging explicit links between CPD, VET and WBL.

In the study of WBL by Seagraves et al (1996) distinctions were made between learning for work (general VET), learning at work (in-house programmes, work experience) and learning through work (the application of job-related knowledge and
skills to tasks and processes, forms of apprenticeship). As Brennan & Little (1996) suggest, in ‘higher education terms, learning for work may well incorporate elements of learning at work and learning through work’ (p.5), all of which are included in ‘policies that have fostered more ‘realistic’ forms of university curricula designed to meet the needs of the changing workforce’ and the ‘fulfilment of career aspiration’ (Boud & Symes, p.15) for HE students. In examining these perspectives, Barnett (2002) reminds us that – although ‘work and learning are not synonymous’ – the ‘two concepts overlap’ since:

Work can and should offer learning opportunities; much learning is demanding, calling on the learner to yield to certain standards, and contains the character of work… the challenge here is that of bringing about the greatest overlap between work and learning (p.19).

This optimistic vision needs to be qualified by the realities of the contemporary workplace which – as research by the National Skills Taskforce (DfEE, 2000b) and the large-scale Learning Society Project (Coffield, 2000) has indicated – typically provide few opportunities for positive employee learning to take place. Although many of the larger British firms do encourage and support learning of all kinds, it is still the case that – as Ashton, Felstead & Green (2000) report – ‘something like two-thirds of the workforce do not work in such organisations’ (p.222). Similar findings in relation to abysmally low levels of employment training apply particularly to small businesses which account for 95% of British firms and around 35% of total employment (Hyland & Matlay, 1998). For these reasons, it is important for educational institutions of all kinds to forge links with industry in the drive to extend learning opportunities to trainees and employees, and WBL has a central role to play in this process.

Social and Economic Capital

General empirical research on the ways in which people acquire knowledge, skills and values in new settings – especially in workplaces in which learners are often seeking admission to communities of practice and culture – have confirmed the importance of social as opposed to individualised learning, even in the sphere of information technology in which solitary learning seems to predominate (Guile & Hayton, 1999). The development of vocational knowledge and skill in particular seems to require attention – not just to intellectual capacities and disciplines – but to the ‘social and cultural context in which cognitive activity occurs’ (Billett, 1996, p.150). Drawing on the ‘activity theory’ of psychologists such as Vygotsky and Luria, a conception of ‘work as practical action’ (Jackson, 1993, p.171) developed in the
1980s, and the new perspectives have been utilised extensively in recent years as a means of identifying meaningful learning in different social contexts.

Wenger (2002) reminds us that:

Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning: from a tribe round a cave fire, to a medieval guild…to a community of engineers…Participating in these ‘communities of practice’ is essential to our learning (p.163).

What Lave & Wenger (2002) call ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ concerns the ways in which newcomers – and, interestingly, workplace learning through forms of apprenticeship is cited as a paradigm case here – come to acquire the knowledge, culture and values which enables them to move from being outsiders to insiders. It is argued that ‘newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity’, and that it is important to view ‘learning as part of a social practice’ (pp.121-2). They go on to observe that:

The social relations of apprentices within a community change their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices’ understanding and knowledgeable skills develop…newcomers’ legitimate peripherality provides them with more than an ‘observational’ lookout post: it crucially involves participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed – in the ‘culture of practice’ (ibid., p.113, original emphasis).

Thus, it could be said that WBL – in addition to fostering the occupational knowledge and skills which go to make up ‘economic’ capital – can, through workplace practice, also facilitate the development of the valuable ‘social’ capital which is located in the ‘kinds of contexts and culture which promote communication and mutual learning as part of the fabric of everyday life’ (Schuller & Field,1998,p.234). Moreover, since all learning is ‘inescapably a social creation’ (Ranson,1998,p.20), it could be argued that learning and the fostering of that social capital required for both working life and the promotion of social cohesion and citizenship (QCA,2002) can be complementary and mutually supportive activities.

**Fostering Social Capital on WBL Programmes**

The interdependence of economic and social capital can also be discerned in the social practices of successful learning organisations in which group and teamwork helps to produce a ‘synthesis of members; interests; (Zuboff,1988,p.394) and that ‘collective intelligence’ (Brown & Lauder,1995,p.28) essential for survival and renewal. Moreover, since the development of vocational knowledge and skills
requires grounding in the ‘social sources’ and ‘communities of practice’ in which it is ‘acquired and deployed’ (Billett, 1996, p.151). WBL serves as an ideal vehicle for the personal and social development of learners which helps to foster those broader skills, values and attitudes required for employment (Industry in Education, 1996).

In terms of broader ‘soft skills’ – particularly those which constitute the interpersonal dimension of key skills such as ‘working with others’ which are also stressed in almost all post-16 learning as well as the new citizenship programmes (OCR/RSA, 2001) – there is evidence that WBL processes are well designed to facilitate the group and team working required in this area. The work of Engestrom (1996), for example, describes how the social transformation of work by project teams helped to produce new collective understandings of tasks and processes and, hence, new knowledge. Similarly, work in Australia (Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk, 1999) – involving researchers from the University of Tasmania and networks of small farmers – demonstrated the importance of collective learning in building social capital and reinforcing greater understanding between small businesses and the communities they serve. Winch (2002) sums up the principal ideas in this area in suggesting that the:

- economic aims of education have both an individual and a social aspect...
- Vocational education...has an important role, both in allowing individuals to realise their own ends in life and in allowing society to develop paid employment to both provide individual fulfilment and to ensure competitiveness and prosperity (p.114).

Managing and Supporting WBL

In order to foster social as well as economic capital, the management and support of learning programmes – from the new vocational programmes for 14-19 year olds, to modern apprenticeships, graduate apprenticeships and Foundation Degrees – WBL elements have to be systematically monitored and supported across formal and informal sites of learning. A number of lessons for securing effective practice have been learned from WBL programmes operating at compulsory and post-compulsory levels (Brennan & Little, 1996; Powell, 2001) and the following seem to be the principal areas for concern and consideration:

1) Co-ordination of Learning Across Sectors

Lessons can be drawn for this important aspect of learning support from previous schemes prioritising WBL such as the New Deal for Young People (NDYP) and Modern Apprenticeships (MAs). Unwin & Wellington’s (2001) research on MAs demonstrated ‘quite vividly that systematic, well-planned mentoring are not occurring as they should on the modern apprenticeship’ (p.109). Similar comments were made
in a Training Standards Council report on the new apprenticeship programme noting that ‘trainee support services, as a whole, were poorly co-ordinated’ (Sherlock, 1999, p.10). Research on the NDYP by Hyland & Musson (2001) identified the crucial role played by personal advisers, particularly in dealing with the most vulnerable learners such as those with few formal qualifications, learning difficulties or lack of motivation. The message is clear: the planning, organisation and support of vocational learning – especially in terms of ensuring coherence between on- and off-the job activity – on programmes involving WBL is vital. Ideally, tutors, advisers and co-ordinators should be familiar with work across formal and informal sectors, perhaps linking with the new omnibus Connexions (DfEE, 2001b) service which is designed to harmonise the whole network of stakeholders in British post-compulsory education and training.

2) Learning, Knowledge and Curriculum

In order to break down what Dewey (1966) called the false oppositions of ‘labour and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind’ (p.301) in vocational education, new conceptions of knowledge are required which integrate on- and off-the job practice and connect workplace and formal learning. As mentioned earlier, the general characteristics of apprenticeship are important here, and continuities between formal and informal learning settings need to be acknowledged and exploited so that – as Guile & Young, 2002) put it – the ‘concept of apprenticeship might serve as a basis for an alternative learning paradigm for formal education and training’ (p.159). Hager (2000) makes similar proposals in arguing for a conception of workplace knowledge which moves away from academic, disciplinary forms, towards a model of ‘work-based learning in terms of people learning to make judgements’ (p.60) in all spheres of vocational activity. In addition to what Young (1998) has called curriculum ‘connectivity’ – forging links between all forms of learning and activity – WBL requires a solid foundation of general education which consists in a ‘core of common, fundamental learnings for working life’ (Skilbeck et al., 1994, p.60) which is characteristic of Continental European VET systems. It is now clear that outcomes-based programmes and qualifications – though they may be appropriate for basic VET – are not well suited to achieving the knowledge, attitudes and qualities associated with citizenship and social capital notions (Young, 2002). In response to the trends away from the more extreme competence-based strategies, new programmes for 14-19 year olds and modern apprentices involve overarching certificates and diplomas which incorporate wider interests, citizenship studies and broad vocational qualifications alongside occupationally-specific training (DfES, 2002).
3) Achievement and Progression

In order to secure the continuity of learning and progression implied by lifelong learning theory, pedagogic reforms will be required to further the organisational changes brought about by the wholesale re-organisation of the post-school sector in Britain under the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The proposals in the LSC Corporate Plan for regional partnerships to deliver local ‘skills, participation and learning’ (LSC, 2001, pp.4-5) will mean nothing if the mechanisms for the management and support of learners mentioned above are not firmly in place. To connect WBL with the vocational ladder of opportunity which the DfES envisages as linking 14-19 education and training with higher level and lifelong learning of all kinds, the broad conception of ‘learning careers’ developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 2002) can provide the necessary framework. A learner career refers to the development of a student’s disposition towards learning over time, and this ‘studentship’ conception can serve to integrate:

- both formal and informal learning from a wide range of learning situations and contexts. It offers insights into how learners continually select, adapt, create and utilize learning opportunities under hugely diverse conditions, in response to their needs as they experience them

(Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2002, p.41).

Conclusion: Work, Community and Social Capital

Although the concept of social capital has both individualistic (personal development) as well as collective (social cohesion) overtones, mainstream perspectives tend to foreground forms of social capital:

- constituted through the social relationships that people have with each other, through the collective knowledge of a group, and the moral, cognitive and social supervision that the group exercises over its members…Social capital in this sense has a strongly moral dimension…often described in terms of the norms of trust prevalent within a society (Winch, 2000, p.5).

The ‘moral’ dimension that Winch refers to applies equally to working practices and general social and civic life. As Putnam (1993) and Giddens (2000) have argued, social capital is a stock which accumulates through use and, as such, requires constant nourishment. WBL programmes may – if they attend to the lessons for best practice noted above – help to provide such nourishment in addition to contributing to the ‘vocational renaissance’ (DfES, 2002, p.1) which is currently a key UK government objective.
As important as all this is the goal of creating a balance between social and economic capital, thus ensuring that the individualism which has dominated learning discourses in former years is supplemented by the collective values of learning communities (Hyland, 1998). Most significant of all – in the light of emerging emphases on the social impact and wider benefits of lifelong learning – is the crucial role that group and team learning plays in fostering that form of social capital which, as Australian researchers in this field noted, consists in ‘shared language, shared experiences, trust, self-development and fostering an identification with the community’ (Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk, 1999, p.143).

References


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