Chapter 14

Overview – Where to Next?

Derek Portwood and Carol Costley

Chapter 14

Overview - Where to Next?

Derek Portwood and Carol Costley

The fortunes of any innovation obviously depend on what is made of it by interested parties. In the case of work based learning in higher education, these are primarily the State, major companies within their networks and universities. The Middlesex experience has shown that while support for the introduction and development of work based learning is forthcoming from all of them, opposition arises when some of the philosophical and practical implications become apparent. While unlikely to snuff out work based learning in higher education, such opposition can undermine its credibility and marginalise its operation. The question of 'Where to next?' for proponents of work based learning must consequently be one of maintaining and increasing positive support in all of these parties to ensure the continuation and full evolution of work based learning.

Fundamental issue

The fundamental issue, therefore, is persuasion. The preceding chapters with their emphasis on sound arguments, successful experimentation and hard evidence are clearly a step in that direction. However, while these have succeeded in gaining a foothold in the university sector, they have not achieved a united front across the interested parties. The next stage, therefore, is the development of an integrated, open ideology publicly subscribed to by all parties. This will give a world view of work based learning, engender conviction and commitment and consolidate the relationship of the positive forces for work based learning within the major interested parties.

Plainly this is a formidable intellectual, political and organisational task. Yet without such an underpinning ideology, the various parties will have no basis for unity or platform for action and will remain unpersuaded that work based learning has any significant contribution to make to socio-economic concerns and the ethos and role of higher education. Formulating and adopting a distinctive ideology must, therefore, be the immediate response to the question of 'Where to next?'.

Formulation of ideology

Ideologies are essentially systems of ideas designed to serve vested interests. At first glance, it seems that work based learning has already proved itself in this respect. From the State's perspective, it has shown that the Government's investment in work based learning projects in universities from the late 1980s has resulted in changing relationships between industry and universities with consequent improvements in the employability of students and the up-grading of workers. However, the Government is obviously not totally persuaded by this action as is evident by its alternative strategy of setting up and supporting Learndirect (formerly known as University for Industry). Perhaps even more significant is its shift in political rhetoric in favour of the concept

of lifelong learning. This amorphous notion avoids the specific, focused claims of work based learning arising from evolving relationships between industry and higher education.

As for major companies within their networks, their increasing realisation of the critical importance of the intellectual capital inherent in their workforce and clients for business success makes them receptive to any means which unlock and enlarge that capital.

Universities using the approaches and instruments of work based learning appear to be well placed to offer that facility but the inadequate resourcing and restrictions experienced by work based learning services within conventional university systems militate against the seizure of these opportunities. Companies increasingly are looking elsewhere or are making their own provision through such developments as corporate universities.

Even the universities which supposedly would welcome the new market opportunities and new means of producing and transmitting knowledge offered by work based learning are scarcely enthusiastic. Pre-occupied by the curricular and organisational implications of the move to mass higher education and beginning to perceive a possible threat from work based learning to the established epistemological order and assessment and quality systems, universities like the government, are opting for the less clear-cut and thereby less upsetting aspirations of lifelong learning.

Work based learning within the university, therefore, cannot take the support from the interested parties for granted. Indeed, the trends depicted above make the formulation of an ideology of work based learning an urgent task.

Definitions and propositions

Several of the key propositions of work based learning have been identified and explored in the preceding chapters. The foremost of them is the indissolubililty of work and learning (exemplified in the case of Shakespeare chapter 10). Each find their basis in each other. Work based learning ends the dichotomy between work and learning even as it opens up a discourse between them. This does not romanticise work based learning but rather accepts the negative as well as positive features of learning from this source.

The proposition that workers are learned necessarily follows. Work based learning eschews a deficit model of the learnedness of workers and from this positive perspective proposes further development.

Other crucial propositions are that work based learning is essentially collaborative and future orientated. The collaborative proposition points first to the principle of mutuality as the defining characteristic of work based learning. Secondly, it affirms that the expression of this learning is relational, hence the importance of concepts such as groups and networks. These are the context of work based learning.

As for its future orientation, this was illustrated by chapters (12 and 13) on new horizons for work based learning. However, these were no more than examples of its future spread. More important, was chapter 3 on methodology which identified research and development as the overarching methodological thrust of work based learning.

Overview - Where to Next?

Implicit in these propositions are many of the definitions required by an ideology of work based learning. These need to be made explicit. Examples would be:

- *Who is and isn't work based learning for?*

In broad terms, the main population is paid workers although as was argued by Costley (chapter 2) unpaid workers may also be covered. In itself, this limitation to a commonplace understanding of work separates work based learning from the amorphous and uncontextualised concepts of experiential learning and lifelong learning. Work based learning might be understood as a division or dimension of them. The primary focus on paid work follows in the steps of the masters of social science (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) and consequently can draw on their theories and offer a critique of them (Portwood, chapter 1). However, unpaid work, especially when undertaken by those in paid employment helps to give a fuller understanding of the learning involvement. It brings in a fuller range of affective and moral aspects of learning. Nonetheless, even as the primary focus is on paid workers, these cannot be treated en masse. This population has many constituencies which provide different kinds of niche markets for work based learning and consequently different formations and expressions of it. In the Middlesex experience, the main constituencies in the early stages of the development of work based learning are managers and professionals seeking postgraduate qualifications (see chapter 12). Another model (chapter 9), however, can be used for conventional full-time undergraduate students.

- *What can and can't work based learning do?*

Work based learning makes plain that personal and professional development though related are not synonymous. Its focus is on work history and career development rather than life history. Doncaster (chapter 5) makes plain the reflective nature of work based learning which brings self-understanding, confidence and esteem (an example in the local community is given by Light, chapter 11). Work based learning consequently goes beyond instrumentality and involves emotions but it cannot embrace all motivations and outcomes of learning. By itself, it is unlikely to inculcate a love of learning and would need to be linked to other sources and spheres of learning for that purpose. Nonetheless, as Portwood (chapter 1) argued, it is creative in so far as it is characterised by intelligent scepticism as well as the focused intelligence of the 'expert'.

For organisations, however, work based learning can produce, sustain and expand intellectual capital. Its capacity to articulate tacit knowledge through its portfolio approach (chapter 5) and its refinement and extension of the organisation's knowledge through research-driven projects (chapter 7) are highly effective means towards this end. It is impossible to conceive of a learning organisation which is not fundamentally committed to and fully exploiting work based learning principles and practices.

- *What are its relationships with other forms and sites of learning?*

Workplaces cannot recognise the boundaries of academic disciplines or place undue emphasis on cognitive abilities as hallmarks of higher learning. Costley (chapter 2) argues that work based learning is essentially interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional. Portwood's (chapter 12) exploration of the doctoral development of work based learning points to the transferability of high level knowledge and skills and advanced capability within operational contexts as descriptions of this highest level of academic/professional learning. Discipline knowledge is not eschewed by work based learning but rather is used selectively on a 'fitness for purpose' basis within a work-based framework of 'fitness of purpose'. In these ways, work based learning is not only redrawing the epistemological map but is using older versions of it for radically different purposes than it was originally intended for. On this basis, it sets its standards.

Overview - Where to Next?

- *Who are the producers, transmitters and assessors of work based learning?*

Work based learning's premise that it starts in any situation with any individual, group, community or organisation from their existing state of learnedness necessarily forecloses any agency monopolising or claiming primacy in the various roles associated with learning. Some agencies will be better equipped to perform some of them than others. But the principle of equitable partnership in work based learning means that all play some part in all the roles. Obviously, as in the case of universities, where an agency holds responsibility for the standards of awards that agency must exercise final authority although it cannot reach its decisions without taking account of the views of the other involved parties. The use of the metaphor of network helpfully portrays the nature of relationships and the common and specialised roles of the members of that network. More importantly, it portrays the mechanism by which the ideology can be constructed and then embedded within the relevant institutions.

Work based learning networks

The Government through its Department of Employment can take much of the credit for the emergence of work based learning in the United Kingdom in the late '80s and early '90s not simply by funding work based learning initiatives but through creating local and national networks of universities and employers engaged in the sponsored work based learning projects. This has been illustrated by the Middlesex experience where the government-sponsored project, 'The Curriculum in the Workplace', which networked a range of organisations provided many the insights into work based learning. These subsequently led to the creation of work based learning as a field of study (see chapter 4). Perhaps the most influential lesson of this experience was that work based learning is inherently collaborative enshrining the principles of mutuality, sharing and equitability. This realisation of the vital importance of networking led Middlesex to initiate a work based learning network within the Universities' Association of Continuing Education. However, this involves universities only and the next step must be to broaden its membership to include companies, trades unions, professional associations and government. Obviously if such a national network is to be effective, it will draw on local networks similarly composed. Consequently, the next step for work based learning should be the development of pilot examples of local work based learning networks initiated by the local university. Strategies for achieving this (government funding, employer and union support, etc) should become a key agenda item for the existing work based learning network. Crucially, that network should continue its current consideration of its links with the networks of the agencies of other interested parties. In the first instance, the rationale for such links will be pragmatic. improving communications, combining resources and sharing expertise will address a set of operational questions, viz.:

- what methods release and realise the potential of work based learning?
- what structures and systems ensure its recognition and rigour?
- what are the most effective instruments of its transmission and use?

Such considerations will inevitably lead to many of the ideological questions mentioned above. Hence, ideology and network are companion concepts for the next stage of the evolution of work based learning.

In conclusion, perhaps the greatest danger to work based learning in the United Kingdom is that its own practitioners do not practise it themselves. The story recounted in the preceding chapters tells of the struggle required to become a distinctive voice and practice on an institutional basis. It could equally tell of the danger of neglecting the principles of its existence and thereby lapsing into an isolated, marginalised activity. Only through its working contacts with the agencies of other

Overview - Where to Next?

interested parties outside the university can work based learning retain its credibility and continue to evolve. The overriding message of this book is, therefore, that any step taken by work based learning practitioners must be a demonstration of work based learning itself.