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Modes of Reflection : Is it possible to use both individual and collective reflection to reconcile the ‘three-party knowledge interests’ in workplace learning?

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Abstract

The European Commission’s 2003 Memorandum of Lifelong Learning recognises the importance of experiential learning in its emphasis on APEL [Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning] both in valuing individual learning that takes place outside the university and in raising individual self-confidence (Pouget and Osborne, 2004, 46). This focus on the importance of APEL to the individual is echoed in the concept of the reflective practitioner, which has been widely adopted across university programmes for professionals. Here, reflection focuses on the development of individual practice, with the (often implicit) assumption that more effective professional practice will enhance performance in the workplace, and thereby provide an indirect benefit to the employer.

Recently, drawing on the concept of reflection but extending it beyond the individual to the group, Boud, Cressey and Docherty have developed the concept of ‘productive reflection at work’. This collective approach to reflection ‘brings changes in work practice to enhance productivity together with changes to enhance personal engagement and meaning in work’ (2006, 5). Moving away from the individual focus which has been dominant in the discourse relating to reflection, productive reflection ‘places reflection of groups in organizations as central’ (2006, 6). Such an approach appears to offer an avenue whereby the process of reflection, through being used individually and collectively, could reconcile the needs of the learner, their employer and the university, in that it could develop the learner, enhance the effectiveness of the organisation and meet the requirements of higher education. This article considers whether this can be the case, and whether the forms of individual reflection and productive reflection are complementary or conflicting.

(A brief glossary of terms is given at the end of the article.)

Reflection, productive reflection, collective reflection, knowledge interests, experiential learning

The value and importance of experiential learning as an element of lifelong learning has been recognised both nationally and internationally. As Pouget and Osborne

point out, 'One of the outcomes of the consultation launched by the Memorandum [of Lifelong Learning] across Europe has been to highlight the importance of 'valuing learning' be it in formal, non-formal or informal settings' (2004, 46). The European University Lifelong Learning Network (EULLearN) argues that the recognition of experiential learning is 'an opportunity to meet the needs of individuals, employers and institutions' (Conradi, Evans and Valk, 2006, 7). The acronym widely used in the UK for the process of identifying and recognising experiential (informal) learning in higher education is APEL (Assessment of Prior and/or Experiential Learning). Considering the relationship between APEL and the individual worker, Van der Kemp claims that 'The labour market has an intriguing 'double role' in APEL', in that it provides workplace experiences for the learner and then employs the qualified workers which result from the APEL process (in Conradi, Evans and Valk, 2006, 224). This argument focuses on an individual approach to the recognition of experiential learning, rather than a collective one, and is similar to the concept of the individual reflection on practice undertaken by the Schon's reflective practitioner.

In UK universities this concept of the individually reflective practitioner, was initially established in programmes such as Education and Social Work, but has now been widely adopted across a range of professions, and integrated into the pedagogy of workplace learning programmes. The advantage of such an approach is that it provides a way in which learners can structure their workplace experience to identify their learning from that experience. This enables the learning to be assessed, and for it to can gain academic recognition. Reflection is a complex process which many learners do not find easy, and facilitating learners' reflection requires a sophisticated pedagogy. The focus in this process is normally on the development of the individual professional and their own particular practice, with the assumption that enhanced individual performance will prove of benefit to the employer through its contribution to improved functioning of the organisation. Therefore, the process of individual

reflection on practice does not explicitly and directly address employers' workplace needs.

Productive Reflection

Recently, building on the concept of reflection on experience but extending it beyond the individual to involve the group, Boud, Cressey and Docherty have developed the concept of 'productive reflection at work'. This is a collective approach to reflection which they claim is the 'key to learning to improve production and to making life at work more satisfying' (2006, 3). The essential element of the learning achieved through this approach is that it is focused on workplace activity – it is 'reflection in and on the work being carried out. This is what we term productive reflection' (2006, 4). They claim this new approach is particularly valuable, because, 'Yesterday's trainees in vocational education and training must now become lifelong learners with greater emphasis on problem solving, interpersonal skills and contextual understanding and capacity for reflexivity' (2006, 5). Thus, productive reflection provides 'a new creative force' which facilitates a 'new form of engagement' at work, and releases 'powerful, intangible resources for the organization' (2006, 5). In addition, productive reflection is of benefit to the individual, in that it 'places the thinking and active subject as central to work organization today' (2006, 5).

Pointing out that productive reflection is 'situated at the confluence of developments in organizational learning and workplace learning drawing on vocational education traditions' (2006, 19), Boud et al argue that the advantage of productive reflection is that it 'leads to action with and for others and for the benefit of the organization as well as the participants in reflective activity' (2006, 20). It would therefore appear that the collective activity of productive reflection could reconcile potentially conflicting demands from the employer, the learner and the university. In order to decide whether this in fact the case, it is helpful to briefly consider how those requirements may differ.

Three party knowledge interests

When writing about the role of experiential learning in allowing employees to gain academic awards from workplace learning, Evans outlines the respective demands of the parties involved:

The employer needs to be clear on what it is he/she wants the employee to learn. The employee needs to be convinced that the new learning will create possible openings for career advancement and/or further qualifications. And the academic needs to be sure that the programme of learning proposed is at an acceptable level for higher education and that procedures will ensure that academic standards are preserved. (in Conradi, Evans and Valk, 2006, 139)

It is, of course, accepted that the primary concern of the employer is of necessity the 'bottom line', but this is a very general concern, and recognition of the need to be economically effective is often expressed by concern with elements which will help achieve this. Activities aimed at greater efficiency can involve both changes in organizational structure and processes, and delivery of a range of staff development provision to help improve individual performance.

Boud et al support their argument for the importance of productive reflection at work with references to the delayering which has taken place in organisations, with the consequent increase in both demands on employees and their influence over decisions made in the workplace (2006, 3). They point out that, with the decrease of bureaucratic organization and the introduction of more fluid occupational structures, 'Employees need to go beyond formal training in order to learn a range of vocational, interpersonal and organizational skills that were not part of previous job demands' (2006, 12). In such a context the professional development of employees is seen by their employer as 'upskilling them' so that they can more easily cope with these increased demands. Employers are aware of the qualities and skills they need from their employees, and will often use professional development to 'home grow' the expertise they need.

From the perspective of the employee, in a national policy context which emphasises the requirement for a flexible workforce to support the national economy, personal and professional development is increasingly important to facilitate career progression. Yet, in contrast to the discourse which emphasises learning across the whole of society and in a wide range of situations, Breidensjo and Huzzard argue that the 'lean organization' has reduced the development of new learning opportunities at work, and that there is 'little scope offered for the necessary time and space associated with learning and development' (2006, 146). According to Snell, any time and space allocated by organisations is likely to be provided for learning rather than development, as he argues that, 'learning in learning organizations doesn't go beyond instrumental techniques or utilitarian methods' (quoted in Nyhan, 2006, 136). In contrast, my own experience from the organisations we are currently working with is that some employers are concerned to provide their employees with professional development opportunities which go beyond training for specific roles. There is also a demand from employees for wider recognition of professional development programmes that they are required to undertake, and they are keen to get academic credits/awards for their efforts. This indicates that the worker/learner is concerned both with his/her personal and professional development and with gaining academic recognition of their achievements.

There is, of course, increasing pressure on the university to engage with employers, and a range of cooperative activities is taking place. It is helpful to distinguish between the two main kinds of workplace activity which involve cooperation between employers and the university. The first of these takes the form of consultancy, whereby the university provides expertise and knowledge transfer to business organisations. This can often take the form of working on particular projects to solve specific problems, or providing forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). As is frequently the case with private sector providers, although the provision of CPD

involves the preparation and delivery of material/workshops, outside certain very specific contexts such as nursing, it rarely requires formal assessment of learning achieved.

The other kind of engagement with employers involves programmes which do involve assessment. There are a range of practice and work-based learning experiences integrated into higher level learning which contribute to academic awards. The 'radical model' of workplace learning, whereby curriculum content is drawn from the workplace is one of the most discussed models. However, whatever the element of workplace learning in a programme, for any academic award to be made it is necessary to consider the requirements of the university.

As Brockbank and McGill point out, the primary purpose of higher education is to encourage conditions for learning that is transformative, and the concern in higher education is with learning that includes but goes beyond the instrumental (1998, 3). Barnett reinforces this view when he argues, 'The learning that goes on in higher education justifies the label 'higher' precisely because it refers to a state of mind over and above the conventional recipe or factual learning' (quoted in Brockbank and McGill, 1998, 19). He is referring to higher level learning that is taking place within a university, but, for full academic recognition to be awarded, learning in the workplace must meet the same standard. It is therefore the case that experience-based workplace learning must demonstrate characteristics of learning equivalent to those required for programmes delivered within the university.

Reflection on Learning

With regard to reflection and learning, Argyris and Schon distinguish between single loop and double loop learning. For the exercise of single loop learning it is possible 'by observing and reflecting on our own actions, to make a description of the tacit knowing implicit in them' (Schon, 1987, 25). However, double loop learning involves not only reflecting on one's actions, but also exploring the assumptions and 'theories-

in-use' which are embedded in those actions. This requires a more critical stance of the learner, and double loop learning makes public the things which single loop learning would leave 'private and undiscussable' (Schon, 1987, 259). It is in double loop learning that the learner's underlying values and assumptions are examined and challenged, and thus opened to change. Brockbank and McGill argue that, whereas single loop learning is characteristic of activities taking place early in an undergraduate programme, at 'mature undergraduate' and postgraduate level the requirement has to be that double loop learning takes place (1998, 44).

When considering the university perspective on experiential learning and reflection, it becomes apparent, as Dewey has stated, that the fact 'that all education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative' (quoted in Criticos, 2006, 162). Moon argues that a distinction needs to be made between what she terms 'informal reflection' and 'academic reflection' – the latter being a formal process (2004, 136).

Usher is useful in considering this distinction, as he points out that 'experiential learning' constitutes a 'key element of a discourse which has this everyday learning from experience process as its 'subject'' (1993, 169). This means that in the academic sphere, the 'discourse of experiential learning is ... a body of knowledge about learning from experience based on constituting experience as a form of knowledge' (Usher, 1993, 169). The recognition of experiential learning in higher education is therefore a formal process which involves 'counter-posing experience with something that is not experience' as part of the learning experience, and which usually culminates in assessment (Usher, 1993, 177). It is through the submission of work to be assessed that experiential learners demonstrate the appropriate standard of achievement for higher education.

However, the term 'reflection' is frequently used in a very loose and general way, and this can easily obscure the disciplined and challenging nature of such learning.

Reynolds distinguishes between critical reflection (an approach in which both experience and its social and political context is examined), reflection (which focuses on the individual and gives little attention to social or political processes), and critical thinking, a term which he argues is 'usually used to signify a disciplined approach to problem solving' (1999, 173). He claims that in the management literature "critical reflection' is being used in the weaker sense to describe thoughtful analysis or problem solving' (1999, 177).

Productive Reflection in the Workplace

It appears that Boud et al use the term productive reflection in this 'weaker' sense to mean a process which is less formal than that structured for the academic recognition of experience-based learning. The nature of the process for supporting such learning is not specified and there is no intention to submit the product of the productive reflection process for assessment. The key innovation of their concept is that it 'emphasises the social collective aspects of reflection – people reflecting together in the workplace' (2006, 6). It represents 'a perspective rather than a set of operational practices' (2006, 8). Moreover, Boud argues that the over-formalization of reflection processes in the workplace 'provokes resistance and can inhibit learning' – a criticism which he also levels at the assessment process in formal education (2006, 159).

Boud recognises the challenges attendant in sensitizing those in the workplace to the concept of productive reflection – he points out that 'reflective ideas are not commonplace in workplaces even those in which learning vocabulary is used, such as educational institutions or enterprises with explicit organisational learning strategies' (2006, 160). Indeed, when writing of their project in the workplace, Bjerlov and Docherty reported that, even when directly involved, workers avoided the term 'reflection' (2006, 102). Such a term and the process it represents does not fit easily

with the action-oriented culture of the workplace. However, Gherardi and Poggio point out that workplace sessions relating to collective reflection need not be labelled as such – they are currently commonly available as ‘debriefing sessions, project follow up and evaluation sessions, continuous improvement sessions, and weekly group meetings’ (2006, 202).

Throughout their book Boud et al emphasise the desirable and widespread nature of productive reflection in the workplace, and this makes it difficult to identify as a distinctive practice. This may be what causes concern, in that, as Breidensjo and Huzzard assert, when adopting the range of practices outlined in the book, the ‘crucial distinction between learning through exploitation and learning through exploration is not generally made’ (2006, 151). In addition, on occasion such ‘learning’ can have specific intentions that are much more clearly of benefit to the employer than to the employee, as, for example, reported by Stebbins et al, when the ‘learning was directed at getting personnel into the required mindset for the change initiated and for promoting development activities that would give quick results’ (2006, 115). While clearly meeting the needs of the employer, such instrumental learning is unlikely to enable the workplace learner to meet the standards required for recognition by higher education and may well not offer them a developmental experience.

Productive Reflection and Academic Reflection

But would it be possible to integrate into these productive reflection activities elements which would address the need for developmental learning? This would, of course, require a more structured approach to be taken to the area, and, as mentioned earlier, this is claimed to inhibit effective reflection. However, perhaps a more relevant issue in terms of achieving higher level learning is the need to demonstrate a critical approach during the activities. The advantage of such an approach is that, in addition to meeting criteria relevant to higher education, this

would help avoid the 'learning through exploitation' risk mentioned above, and could be of direct benefit to the learner in terms of personal and professional development. However, there are indications that the integration of such an element into collective productive reflection could introduce factors that would mean that it does not provide an effective response to employers' needs.

Reynolds, writing in relation to learning inside the university, reports that the proposal to introduce critical reflection into management education 'reflects increasing concern that occupying positions of influence should be matched by a corresponding sense of responsibility' (1999, 173). He argues that, 'The function of management education should not be to help managers fit unquestioningly into the roles traditionally expected of them, but to assist them in engaging with the social and moral issues inherent within existing management practice' (Reynolds, 1999, 182). However, he points out that, in his experience, there is a reluctance to engage with a critical approach within management studies. If this is the case inside the university where the culture supports such a perspective, it is highly likely that there will be real challenges in attempting to introduce a critical perspective in the workplace.

In order for experiential work-based learning to engender the personal development aimed for in higher education, the adoption of a critical stance by the employee would need to be encouraged in the workplace. However, as Ellstrom points out, the areas of reflection and learning are largely outside the remit of the workplace, 'hence the added ... dimension that educationalists would bring is ... a problem' (2006, 54). In addition, he points out that collective reflection has the potential to disrupt the existing hierarchy, to unsettle any consensus in the workplace, and could entail a loss of control for management (Ellstrom, 2006, 63). Given the dominant organizational culture in most workplaces, 'identifying and questioning assumptions goes against the organizational grain' (Hammer and Stanton, quoted in Vince, 2002, 67).

Stebbins et al claim that, 'educational interventions and expert consulting, if cooperatively sponsored by both researchers and clients, show high promise for stimulating productive reflection and learning' (2006, 90). However, the grounds for this assumption are not clear, in that even in their own study, they recount that when researchers raised questions designed to stimulate collective reflection the project group decided to commit neither time nor resources to them. Indeed, 'in the larger change programme, learning and reflection were not perceived as important elements in the change programme' (Stebbins et al, 2006, 88).

In another study, Vince reports that, organizational reflection proved difficult to apply due to the fact that 'entrenched organizational dynamics and established power relations are now seen as 'normal' aspects of organizing' (2002, 74). With regard to a critical approach to reflection, Reynolds refers to Nord and Jenner's finding that managers were receptive and interested in critical analysis if they were unhappy with the prevailing organizational culture, or frustrated with their own professional circumstances (1999, 175). Such factors are likely to mean that senior managers responsible for managing the organization could find that this form of critical reflection could complicate the requirements of their own role.

When considering the experience of individual learners, in addition to the distinction made between 'informal' and 'academic' reflection, it is also important to distinguish between self reflection and reflection directed outwards at an ongoing situation. It is much easier to think about an external situation than to analyse one's own learning experience. As Elmholdt and Brinkman point out, 'It is extraordinarily difficult to identify what one is learning when engaged in a learning task or at a time close to the period of activity' (2006, 45). This means that the ability to reflect is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for developmental learning. As Usher and Bryant explain, 'experience without critical analysis can be little more than anecdotal reminiscence'

(quoted by Brookfield, 1993, 30). It is easy to conflate 'informal' reflection with 'academic' reflection, and to overlook the complexity of the activities involved in the latter. This is well set out by Schon when he states: 'it is one thing to be able to reflect-in-action and quite another to reflect *on* our reflection-in-action so as to produce a good verbal description of it, and it is still another thing to be able to reflect on the resulting description' (1987, 31). Powell explains that, 'part of the difficulty [in undertaking effective reflection] lies in the intellectual demand imposed by the sudden switching of attention which is required for immediate reflection on learning. One has to be able to move rapidly and with ease from ,say, intense involvement in a discussion of ideas and feelings quite unrelated to what was being talked about a short time before ... The distancing which is required and the cognitive dislocation which is involved' poses a considerable challenge for the learner (1985, 45).

An important part of the discipline involved in systematic reflection is what Mason terms the 'discipline of noticing', and, as he points out 'For noticing part of me needs to be doing and part of me needs to be observing' (1993, 120). Although 'noticing' sounds a relatively easy thing to do, systematic noticing of the type required for critical reflection demands a high level of discipline from the learner. The process requires the development of meta-cognitive skill – a skill which is rarely discussed in the workplace but which managers need if they are to accurately evaluate their own performance and development. This is because, as Boxer explains, in order for a manager to judge the quality of their own development s/he must be able to critically evaluate it, and this involves treating experience 'objectively' (1985, 126).

The foregoing discussion indicates the difficulty of ensuring that any reflective exercise is of developmental benefit to the learner, and flags up the sophistication and challenge of achieving developmental learning through experience. It is hard to see how this can be achieved through productive reflection, because the focus of the

productive reflection process is on the situation, i.e. on external factors, rather than on a disciplined and critical evaluation of the learning experienced.

With regard to the university, Boud et al argue that 'reflection has hitherto been neglected in the context of making sense of work experience for those in work, as distinct from those preparing for work' (2006, 4). This is a surprising statement, although it may be that practice in Australia is different to that in the UK, where the concept of the reflective practitioner has been extremely influential both inside and outside the university. Here there is a growing scholarship and discourse relating to the support and facilitation of experience-based learning in the workplace and elsewhere. It is the case, as Boud et al argue, that there has been a dominance of an individual perspective in these areas of education. However, this is not due to lack of awareness of the collective nature of knowledge producing activities in the workplace, as the wide reception of the concept of communities of practice indicates. It is in part due to the challenges of accommodating academic recognition of group achievement in a higher education culture which is predicated on the concept of individual achievement. This is an area of on-going interest to colleagues engaging with workplace learners.

It is worth noting that when Schon was advocating the importance of reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice as fundamental in ensuring effective professional education, he did emphasise the necessity of awarding adequate academic recognition for the processes involved in supporting this. He argued that 'A reflective practicum is unlikely to flourish as a second class activity', and that there must be 'first class faculty' involved with this area, with the full recognition of the role which he called 'coach' in professional terms (1987, 171). Schon was discussing the practicum which was integrated as part of a taught academic programme, but the principle can be applied more widely to include reflective learning in the workplace.

Despite the growing tradition of reflective learning in and from the workplace, we are still faced with the challenge of ensuring that academic colleagues from the disciplines understand the principles involved here.

Conclusion

In advocating productive reflection at work, Boud et al explain that in 'surfacing this notion and naming it we hope to make it more accessible and available for wider use' (2006, 18). Many of the activities outlined in the book appear to fall into the category of informal reflection, and there are no instances where learning from productive reflection was formally identified or assessed. These reflective activities could, of course, provide 'raw material' for a workplace learner who wished to engage more systematically with academic reflection, although that would then return the focus to the individual.

However, it could be argued that concern with the individual learner is the appropriate focus for those in higher education. When considering productive reflection, it is accepted that this perspective 'encompasses a wide range of interests not all of which are mutually compatible' (Boud et al, 2006, 18). In addition, at fairly regular intervals in the book concern is expressed that collective reflection could be used with adverse consequences for employees. Examples of this are when the 'focus of learning under lean production is that of exploiting and diffusing existing knowledge of waste elimination rather than the generation of new knowledge for development through collective reflection' (Breidensjo and Huzzard, 2006, 153), or the risk that 'The reflective learning discourse may produce self-deceptive subjects' – subjects who accept the organization's purposes as their own (Elmholdt and Brinkman, 2006, 178). When engaging with employers, the university's focus on the fundamental importance of individual learning and development can offset the risk of employee exploitation.

The book provides an interesting perspective on a general range of reflective activities in the workplace. For the authors, 'Creating space for reflection is a metaphor for renewal and development. By having it as part of our agenda for working life we are reminded that for ourselves and for our organizations there are important things beyond the present task' (2006, 168). This is a valuable reminder, and those of us engaged with workplace learning would number developmental education as one of the things which can take employees beyond their immediate work role.

The external focus and collective nature of productive reflection, which the authors argue is intended to lead to action in contrast to understanding, is put forward as 'a position we consider is fruitful for further development' (2006, 18). In its current form this approach can meet some needs of employer and learner, although the interests of the former are given priority over those of the latter. However, as it is, it cannot effectively reconcile the needs of employer, learner and university. Yet it has been put forward as a position from which further developments can take place, so it will be interesting to see whether developments emerging from it can redress the balance so that the potentially competing interests of employee, employer and the university are more evenly addressed.

Glossary of Terms

Experiential Learning	This is learning based on a learner's experience in work and/or life – such learning takes a different form to formal theoretical learning. Learning which arises through experience has not usually been formally assessed; it is therefore necessary to design appropriate assessment for it to gain academic recognition.
APEL	An acronym often used in the UK to refer to the assessment and recognition of prior certificated (formal) and/or experiential (informal) learning

Productive reflection	A form of collective reflection in the workplace which focuses on work processes and problems
Reflective practitioner	Schon's model of professional practice, in which an individual professional reflects on their own practice in order to improve it
Single loop learning	The outcome of reflection on practice which occurs when a professional reflects on and evaluates the way they do things
Double loop learning	The outcome of reflection on practice which occurs when a professional reflects not only on the way they do things but also analyses the implicit assumptions which underpin approaches to action in their organisation

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