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Reflection in work-based learning: self-regulation or self-liberation?

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This article considers the role of reflective practice in work-based learning in higher education. The benefits of using reflection for learning at work have been widely recognised and the pedagogy to support reflection is now established. However, the use of reflective practice has been subjected to considerable critique, and many of the criticisms draw on Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality, pastoral power, confession and self-regulation. Drawing on our professional experiences of supporting students in undertaking reflection, we examine the general critique put forward. Having considered the case that reflection supports self-regulation in a way which disadvantages individuals while benefiting organisations, we argue that reflection can be used to empower individuals. We do this by drawing attention to the elements of Foucault's argument which include the importance of agency in the exercise of power.

Keywords: critical reflection; reflection; self-liberation; self-regulation; work-based learning

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine the potentially problematic role of reflective practice in work-based learning. The extension of higher education into the workplace and the adoption of pedagogies which support reflection on practice have stimulated considerable debate (Costley 2000; Walsh 2008, 2009). Much of the literature expresses a concern with either the market-based nature of the workplace which affects the nature of the learning experience available, or with the extent to which work-based learning, particularly the use of reflection in the workplace, can be used to reinforce existing power relations in organisations. This discussion is frequently carried out with reference to Foucault's (2002) complex concepts of power and governmentality.

Critical discourse has consistently defined the workplace as a site of control where various forms of oppression and manipulation and other more subtle forms of control are exercised on all levels of the organisation, particularly in 'knowledge-intensive' industries (Contu and Willmott 2003; Deetz 1998). Employees in these industries are a particularly important resource, and arguably their effective functioning is fundamental to the organisation. In such a context, reflection on practice as a means of enhancing individual performance has been a particular focus

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for critique, and post-structuralist analyses of power, discipline, discourse and confession allow us to consider its more contested aspects. Foucault's ideas, which emphasise the importance of voluntary self-policing in achieving conformity with social demands, offer an interesting perspective on the issues of individual subjectivity in the workplace.

Work-based learning and reflection

The expansion of work-based learning in higher education raises challenges to the traditional understanding of knowledge (what Gibbons et al. 1994 refer to as Mode 1 knowledge), and blurs the boundaries between formal education and informal learning at work. One of the tools of inquiry used in work-based learning and work-based research is reflective practice. It is the through process of reflection on practice that workplace experience is transformed into learning, enhancing individual performance in the workplace. This approach to professional practice, originally introduced by Schön, emphasises the importance of activity in practice, and recognises 'the intelligence inherent in skilful action' (Kinsella 2007, 407). Kinsella (2007, 408) points out that Schön 'notes that skilful practice may reveal a kind of knowing that does not stem from a prior intellectual operation'. Schön's concept of reflection in and on expert practice challenges the distinction commonly made between theory and practice and the privileging of theory, enabling the practitioner to examine and evaluate practice in context. In doing this, reflective practice offers an alternative to the traditional approaches to knowledge which have privileged de-contextualised abstract models. Such a perspective complements the perspective taken by work-based learning, where there is an emphasis on knowledge production in context providing a platform from which to challenge traditional notions of epistemology within the academy. One of such traditional notions is that 'objectivity' and 'value-neutrality' can only be achieved through distance (Costley 2000, 33).

Students on work-based learning programmes commonly take personal and professional development planning and/or reflective practice modules, the aim of which is to encourage reflection on an individual's own learning, performance and/or achievement and planning for their personal, educational and career development (Higher Education Academy 2012). Such modules are fundamental to the structuring of programmes which draw on workplace activities for curriculum content. Through them students are encouraged to evaluate their own professional practice, become more aware of their own preconceptions and assumptions, gain a better understanding of ethics, and integrate theory and practice. Students are often required to produce personal development plans, and/or analyse and evaluate aspects of their current professional practice. The facilitation of both personal development planning and reflective practice requires a sophisticated pedagogy and the provision of a theoretical framework that helps the learner to make sense of experience and to learn from that experience (Dyke 2006). The theoretical framework enables the learner to 'intellectualise' reflection, and to translate their experience into a form of academic discourse which is assessable. When dealing with a student's experiential learning, it is necessary to clearly distinguish learning from experience, and to design assessment which supports the development of theoretically informed insight rather than the provision of anecdotal evidence.

Self-regulation through reflection

The politics of reflection and the reflective assignment in higher education is complex, and subject to criticism. Reflective commentaries provided by the students are often overly self-critical, guilt-ridden and aimed at demonstrating inauthentic transformation of an individual (MacFarlane and Gourlay 2009). When considering reflection on practice and work-based learning, Jeffrey and McCrea (2004) comment that reflection appears to be perceived as an 'agenda' or as an aspect of policy rather than a metacognitive process undertaken by individuals. They also argue that reflection is linked with economic objectives in that people are invited to reflect only if it means reflecting on 'how I can work harder and more effectively to meet my manager's and my organisation's goals' (2004, 110). This argument highlights the view that reflection is undertaken for the benefit of the organisation, and provides a fairly explicit material critique of the practice. However, there are other more sophisticated critiques of reflective practice which associate reflection with self-regulation and the disempowerment of employees.

Foucauldian critics (for example, Knights and Vurdubakis 1994) indicate that in the workplace employees, consciously or unconsciously, modify their actions and learn to deal with the multitude of power relations within which they have to operate. Choosing from a range of 'tactics', workers either yield to external influences, or display resistance to them by devising strategies which subvert the exercise of power (Siebert and Mills 2007). In addition, workers who undertake work-based learning are required to engage with reflective practice, and therefore, it is argued that work-based learners engage in another form of control – self-control or self-surveillance, an inevitable consequence of a dual role of learners and workers. Zemblyas (2006) argues that by engaging in reflective practice, the work-based learner exposes himself/herself to public scrutiny, and also becomes subject to self-control and self-surveillance.

Using Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and social technology of control (Foucault 1982, 1991), Deetz (1998) investigates employees' subordination and engagement in active self-surveillance/self-control. He argues that even though the reduction of direct control gives employees a sense of liberation, more unobtrusive ways of control are introduced to allow for different operations of power (Deetz 1998). To participate in the process of self-control employees *consent* to be subject to this new form of power, and, in order to obtain money, security or identity actively subordinate themselves to the power in the organisation:

> Despite the sense of autonomy in the employees, there is a constant sense that they are being evaluated and that, if they complain or object, something negative will happen. They work to sustain an image that will allow them power and security. (Deetz 1998, 168)

The discussion of self-regulation through reflection conveys the image of perpetual observation from which it is impossible to escape, and thus suggests parallels with Foucault's reference to the Panopticon (Foucault 1991), Bentham's all-seeing eye. However, rather than people being subject to the possibility of consistent external supervision, reflection causes surveillance to become self-surveillance, which is a product of yet another form of power discussed by Foucault (1982) – pastoral power. Exercised through confession, Foucault argues that pastoral power has become crucial in the governance of modern society, and has replaced the disciplinary power

of external supervision (Usher and Edwards 1995). Using the concept of govern-mentality, Foucault argues that people are governed, not through repression, but through 'educating people to govern themselves' and that pastoral power works through 'bringing people's self-regulating capacities in line with the gaze (and regulation) of 'government' (Usher and Edwards 1995, 15). In many respects reflection can be perceived as a way of bringing one's actions in line with the 'government', not through compliance, but through self-discipline and through construction of the reflective self. Foucault says that pastoral power cannot be exercised 'without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets' (Foucault 1982, 214). In the field of education, Usher and Edwards (1995) argue that the shift to pastoral power through confession has been particularly noticeable in practices such as recognition of prior learning, portfolio-based assessment, learning contracts and self-evaluation. These practices are commonplace in work-based learning.

Usher and Edwards (1995) have observed that the self-disclosure arising from reflection can lead to personal development and empowerment. However, elsewhere they point out the apparent illusion in such a belief: 'Thus in confessing we feel liberated, even though we are still 'subject' to the power-knowledge formations that shape subjectivity as an entity that confesses. Confession, therefore, results in regulation through self-regulation, discipline through self-discipline (Usher and Edwards 1994, 95). Thus, the argument is made that individual identification of the benefit which comes from the exercise of reflection is an illusion, and that any benefit actually accrues to the organisation.

Self-regulation and the university

The tripartite agreement between the student, the university and the employer forms the foundation of work-based learning. As the word 'agreement' suggests, the interests of all three parties have to be reconciled. In particular, the requirements of the academy have to be reconciled with the demands of the employer, as both stakeholders act as assessors of the learner/worker. Arguably, the most contested aspect of reflection in education is assessment (see for example Hobbs 2007, or Hargreaves 2004) where students' reflective commentaries are often based on 'emotional performativity' (MacFarlane and Gourlay 2009, 455). Rather than privately evaluating their own practice and achievement, the learner exposes himself/herself to the scrutiny of others during the process of assessment, and this may affect the authenticity of reflection. The presence of the assessor echoes Foucault's ideas of the partner to whom the subject confesses. Foucault claims that, 'one does not confess without presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority...' (Foucault 1998, 61–62) In the workplace, the examining partner will almost always be superior in status and in the university, the work-based learner's reflection is assessed by a tutor, whose power to judge means that true partnership is not possible. In such situations, as Jeffrey and McCrea (2004, 108) note 'it would indeed be a bold student who was prepared to expose a minority, or radical, set of beliefs and values to the scrutiny of assessors, a professional body, or potential employers'.

The university disciplines the learners by requiring them to meet particular 'academic' requirements in their assessment. The requirement to draw on the theories

and models of reflection in reflective practice is the case in point. The requirements of the assessment also lead to a situation where the student feels the need to provide a 'right answer', i.e. feels that he/she needs to present a certain image of himself/herself. However, rather than 'baring the soul' as in confession, the reflective subject of the enquiry is controlled by the image that he/she wants to project, in other words, the subject is *constructed* by the image (Bleakley 2000, 407). Selves are produced through social practices, and an assessment is one of such practices (Bleakley 2000). From this perspective, academic disciplines and the assessment requirements accompanying them could be seen as the exercise of power over learners (Nicoll 2008). Boud and Walker (2002) claim that a good reflective space requires a level of trust appropriate to the level of disclosure, and that confidentiality needs to be respected. In exposing the content of their reflection of the scrutiny of others who have authority over them, the learner/worker risks a negative judgement, either from the academy or from their employing organisation. Trust is essential in making the exercise meaningful: however, our experience of facilitating work-based learning in higher education suggests that a lack of trust in the workplace, and the managers' intentions hinders learning from reflection. 'Self-censored' reflective accounts may not be perceived as meaningful learning.

A similar situation applies to the process of engagement in personal and professional development planning which bears resemblance to the act of writing a curriculum vitae (CV) in that both activities require a fairly thorough 'inventory of self'. Metcalf defines the CV as 'one of the great confessional texts of our age' (1992, 620), and argues that CVs are often based on the subject being selective, on managing 'guilty secrets' and 'forgetfulness'. The process, therefore, involves the same techniques of image management that are used in reflection. Although identifying weaknesses allegedly helps learners to recognise their 'development needs', this can be perceived to be a euphemism for exposing deficiency and/or underperformance to a manager or a university assessor. In such a context, the reflective practitioner at work and the reflective learner at the university are likely to adapt their output to the requirements that will provide a successful outcome – whatever that may be. It could therefore be argued that learner/workers are doubly disadvantaged, in that they are put under pressure to meet the requirements of different discourses of power. If, as is sometimes argued, reflection empowers and encourages a voice, the question then arises – whose voice do the learner/workers speak – their own, their employing organisation's or the university's? It has been claimed that, although creating an illusion of empowerment, reflection and 'confession' create a mechanism of self-regulation either by embedding 'good' practice or controlling employees (Jeffrey and McCrea 2004).

As Usher and Edwards point out in their discussion of the limitations of 'self-empowerment':

> Discourses 'empower' by creating active subjects with certain capacities... At the same time regulation can take the form of self-regulation, where knowledge is self-knowledge. At one level this produces 'empowered' subjects: individuals who are empowered by learning and knowing more about themselves. However, the subjects 'disempower' themselves in the very process of 'self-empowerment', because this very power of learning about oneself is also the condition for self-regulation; one learns the 'limits' of one's possibilities – 'limits' which are a function of discourses rather than 'natural' factors (Usher and Edwards 1994, 97–98).

An important point is made at the end of this quotation – that the 'limits' discovered to individual possibilities are a social product. This is a point which does not easily become apparent since power dynamics usually operate implicitly. However, it is a point which is highly relevant to the balance of the discussion in the article, so, having considered the critiques of reflection based on Foucault's work, this article will move on to consider an alternative interpretation of the implications of the power relations involved in reflective practice in the workplace.

Self-liberation through reflection

Despite the foregoing critiques of what MacFarlane and Gourlay (2009, 458) call the 'reflection game', it could be argued that work-based learning, particularly the type which bases its curriculum content directly on workplace activities, represents a broadening of knowledge recognition. It allows for recognition of learning and knowledge produced outside the academy, and for 'practice knowledge' to 'count'. This is a valuable addition to widening participation in higher education, and can it often benefit those learners who could otherwise not gain higher level qualifications. Lewis (2007, 398) makes an interesting point when he claims that:

> ...there are silences on the question of class dimensions of the skill question. It is the case that where social inequalities exist in societies, such inequalities are reflected in the quality of education that children from different strata receive, this in turn determines whether or not one becomes qualified enough to get a high wage job.

This reference is to the disadvantages that lower income groups experience in pre-labour market entry education. Until recently education at all levels was something which took place before getting a job, and educational opportunity was almost exclusively offered to young people prior to their entry to the labour market. Therefore, if family finances demanded that a person gets a job as early as possible, educational chances would be limited. The greater responsiveness provided by work-based learning and the use of workplace experience in learning can help address the imbalance which occurs through economic disadvantage. In order to ensure an effective learning experience in the workplace the pedagogy which requires reflection is an integral part of such programmes.

Yet, because learning as a discursive term is subject to political influences (Contu, Grey, and A. Örtenblad 2003; MacFarlane and Gourlay 2009), concern has been expressed over whose 'voice' the learner/worker uses (Usher and Edwards 1995, 13) with the claim that autonomy is difficult to achieve in the workplace. The implication here is that in any workplace 'voice' is inevitably structured by the employer, and that the power situation is relatively clear and straightforward. However, this is to oversimplify power relations. In contrast, Griffiths rejects the claim that 'hearing the voice of relatively powerless people gives relatively more powerful ones a management tool to control them' (cited in Hodgson 2009, 567). Also, such an argument could be claimed to be consistent with Foucault's rejection of repressive theories of power (Merquior 1985, 109). Emphasising the fluid nature of power dynamics, Foucault points to the exercise of power through discursive practices, and, as Ahl (2008, 154) points out, 'Foucault says that foremost in discursive practices are assumptions that are taken-for-granted'. This is an area which is explicitly addressed

through reflection on practice. For example, Argyris and Schön claim that we all use personal theories to inform our practice and that these are both taken for granted and implicit. They argue that it is important to make these theories-in-use explicit because they impose 'a normative template of reality' which needs evaluation (Kinsella 2007, 398). As Kinsella points out, through undertaking reflection people become aware of their principles for action, and 'becoming aware of tacit frames [for action] creates an awareness of more possibilities for action' (Kinsella 2007, 399). The recognition of socially constructed 'barriers' and the awareness of alternative courses of action, even if they are subject to constraint, can only be liberating.

Hodgson (2009, 570) points out that:

> There is a tendency in many Foucauldian approaches to the sort of contemporary Western educational context to draw pessimistic conclusions on the basis of the all-pervasive and self-determined nature of our subjectivation (sic) by performativity and accountability. A Foucauldian understanding of power is often misconstrued as denying the agency of the individual. Far from this, in fact, he shows that power is only produced by human agency.

It is frequently the case that, in such critiques, the learner/worker is treated as uniformly at a disadvantage, being on the receiving end of discourses of power which manipulate conformity. The variety in individual practice and response is frequently not addressed. Also, yet, as Fejes and Nicoll (2008, 9) point out, Foucault's model of power and discipline can only work if 'subjects are *capable of action*'. If the limitations of a situation are such that behaviour is totally determined, 'then there is no longer an exercise of power; it has been supplanted by a situation of constraint' (2008, 9). This offers fluidity to any context which means that where there are dynamics of power there are also always possibilities (Zackrisson and Assesson 2008, 124). It is through the exploitation of such possibilities that reflection can help empower work-based learners.

When considering power dynamics in the workplace, it is certainly the case that opportunities to learn in the workplace are not evenly distributed. As Billett points out, 'Access to activities and guidance through work can render learning opportunities either rich or poor. The participatory factors that make available and distribute these opportunities are not benign' (Billett 2002, 65). Opportunities for development and learning are affected by 'seniority in workplaces...and work demarcations...Workplace cliques, affiliations, gender, race, language or employment standing' (Billett 2004, 62). However, such aspects of organisational culture usually operate at an informal level, and are not immediately apparent to those disadvantaged by them. Griffiths argues that 'we are always in the DKDK zone', meaning that we do not know what we do not know (Hodgson 2009, 569). An example of this given by Hodgson is 'that which is unacknowledged such as the influence of one's race, gender or class on one's work' (2009, 569). When considering one of these aspects, gender dynamics in the workplace, Martin (2006) argues that, 'Like many other social dynamics, the practising of gender is informed by tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is associated with liminal consciousness; knowledge that is below the level of full consciousness' (261). In the course of her discussion, she cites an example of informal practice: 'When men call women 'girls', they infantilise them and call into question women's competence and authority' (2006, 268). While

appearing superficial and trivial, the consistent exercise of such practices acts to undermine women in the workplace.

When reflection is applied to the production of knowledge and practice in context, in addition to the analysis and evaluation of one's professional practice, there is also the requirement to analyse and evaluate the relationship between practice and organisational context. The result is that the contrast between organisational espoused theories (for example, 'We are an equal opportunities organisation ...') which are frequently assumed to be 'true' and organisational theories-in-use which reflect different informal practice are often uncovered. This could be of real benefit to those 'Professional women [who] face subtle, but nevertheless real and highly effective, sexist discrimination in the workplace' (Brookfield 2008, 138), in that the discourses which structure their disadvantage would become apparent. Gender is just one example of the social discourses of power which function in the workplace. In addition, it could be argued that, for all work-based learners engagement with different practices (the organisational and the academic) broadens their perspective. Acquaintance with these two discourses of power will alert them to the existence of difference and to the possibilities that it provides, and will allow them to negotiate their professional path in recognition that these exist.

It is also the case that discussion of Foucault in the context of work-based learning tends to focus on workplaces outside the university which carries the implication that the discussant is outside the power dynamics of the workplace. This overlooks the fact that the university is also a place of employment, and will, therefore, impact on employee exercise of autonomy. Usher et al. (2002) define autonomy as the 'government of the self by the self, a freedom from dependence, a situation where one is influenced and controlled only by a source from within oneself' (Usher et al. 2002, 78). But how many of us are in that happy position? As Brookfield (2008, 135) points out, 'Ordinary men and women – which means almost all of us – struggle along with received ways of thinking and doing'. It is important to remember that 'for Foucault a better understanding of the working of power does not automatically put us in a position where we can free ourselves from the impact of the workings of power' (Biesta 2008, 199), and to appreciate that 'the autonomous, self-reflective life does not overcome power relations' (Fejes and Nicoll 2008, 6). However, increased autonomy and self-reflection may provide the tools to negotiate discourses of power more effectively.

Zemblyas argues that 'reflection becomes a basic pedagogical stance and research tool for analysing and improving one's practice (and self)' and 'one of the by-products of the growing level of activity in work-based learning has been the increasing demand on workplaces to act as sites for inquiry and reflection' (Zemblyas 2006, 297). If implemented meaningfully, reflection invites practitioners to question 'ethics, values and underpinning theory, which form the basis of professional practice' (Jeffrey and McCrea 2004), or challenge traditional academic notions of epistemology (Costley 2000). As such reflection in practice offers a potential challenge not just to the status quo in the workplace, but also to that in higher education. Nicoll (2008, 168) argues that:

> ...shifts in education, such as those towards and within a framing of lifelong learning, workplace or e-learning (or an emphasis on increasing choice, autonomy and self-reflection)...provide the possibility for disturbing the pedagogic practices for the

formation and maintenance of other [academic] disciplines and, with that, the subjections of learners.

From this perspective, the reflection that is integral to work-based learning is one of a range of practices which invite the learner to evaluate and challenge not only their own professional practice, but also the academic theory that claims to 'explain' that practice.

Our teaching experience suggests that a significant number of students undertaking work-based learning report that reflection has provided great benefits through the consolidation of learning, enabling good practice to be replicated, leading to increased efficiency and providing a platform for open and honest discussion. In addition, the explicit consideration of personal and professional development planning allows the learner/worker to identify gaps in skills, and helps create a way for them to articulate their aspirations and learning requirements, and design their study accordingly. This would indicate that setting the interests of the work-based learner against those of the organisation is an oversimplification. As Helyer and Hooker (2007) point out, 'Learning enhances skills and builds a better more productive workforce ... However it must be remembered that learning also transforms and improves lives' (76). To assume that work-based learning and reflection is of benefit only to the employer fails to recognise that, 'An employee's wish to better themselves and even their performance at work may actually have little to do with how they feel about the company as a whole or the owner/manager' (Helyer and Hooker 2007, 78).

Tallantyre puts the case for work-based learning clearly:

> At the level of equity and diversity, it is essential that higher education supports people who wish to continue their learning to higher levels ... in whatever context they ... find themselves. Since work dominates adult life as the main form of sustainable existence, many will inevitably make their choice in that context. Moreover, for many it is the source of both greater motivation than earlier academic experiences for which they could see less applicability, and greater support from employers than from parents whose own aspirations were limited. It has already been proven that workforce development activity is more likely to widen participation by those from lower socio-economic groups than almost any other activity. (Tallantyre, 2008: 5)

This highlights the potential benefits work-based learning offers to a group of students who cannot be reached by the established model of higher education. It is recognised that there are tensions in the workplace which need to be negotiated, but negotiating challenges and tensions is part of adult life. Also, the practice of reflection supports work-based learners in doing this more effectively. Drawing on Dewey's pragmatism, work-based learning tutors take a perspective on 'learning [which] rests upon a mode of life where reason is exercised through problem solving, where the individual participates ... and in the process constitutes their own development' (Olssen 2008, 44).

Conclusion

Having considered the argument that reflection supports self-regulation in a way that disadvantages individuals while benefiting organisations, this article puts forward a claim that reflection in work-based learning can empower individuals.

The authors argue that reflection allows for recognition of a broader range of knowledge, awarding validity to types of knowledge which have hitherto been undervalued. In addition, it supports the explicit recognition of aspects of organisational culture that operate 'below the surface', and can help expose the contrast between organisational espoused theories and theories-in-use. Moreover, active engagement with different discourses of power (those of the workplace and of higher education) alerts learner/workers to the existence of difference and the opportunities that it provides. This is consistent with Foucault's view that the dynamics of power offer possibilities as well as constraints. Through the exploitation of such possibilities, even within the constraints posed by the labour market, more disadvantaged individuals are alerted to the possibility of change. Biesta (2008, 201) points out that Foucault's critique is aimed at 'those who are struggling to make possible different ways of being and doing'. Through reflection learner/workers are supported in analysing and evaluating their workplace and helped in identifying where change may be an option for them.

Finally, it could be proposed that, in using Foucault to critique work-based learning, people are both misplacing the emphasis in his model and over-estimating the determining practices of education for adults. In contrast to those of us employed within education, and therefore, embedded in its discourses, mature workers 'use adult education within their own stories of their own pattern of life' and adapt it to their own purposes (Zackrisson and Assesson 2008, 123). Acceptance by higher education that this is the case involves the recognition that the individual subject is not a dependent variable who is the historical product of power, but '...[is] an independent variable...a force shaping conduct' (Merquior 1985, 138). From this perspective, reflection is a tool which can be used to individual advantage.

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