

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

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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). In the UK, this focus on the importance of APEL to the individual is extended through the concept of the reflective practitioner, a model which emphasises the importance of experience to learning in the workplace, and which has been widely adopted across university programmes for professionals. Recently, 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). This paper considers whether a combination of individual and collective reflection can be used as a basis for assessment, and thus reconcile the needs of learner, employer and university.

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

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). As the acronym indicates, APEL refers to learning experiences which have taken place prior to entry to an academic programme, but the development of reflective practice means that current experience in the workplace can be fully integrated into academic programmes. In UK universities individual reflection on practice was initially established in programmes such as Education and Social Work, but it 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, working with a tutor, learners can structure their workplace experience to identify their learning from that experience. This enables the learning to be assessed, and for it to gain academic recognition as part of an award.

Reflection is a complex process which many learners do not find easy, and facilitating learners' reflection requires a sophisticated pedagogy (see Walsh The focus in this process is on the development of the individual professional and their own particular practice, with the assumption that enhanced professional performance will benefit the employer.

Productive Reflection

Recently, Boud, Cressy and Docherty have developed the concept of 'productive reflection at work', which takes a collective approach to reflection and 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). 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 involves collective action which directly benefits both the organisation and the individual. It therefore appears that productive reflection could reconcile the potentially conflicting demands from the employer and the learner which need to be taken into account when designing academic wards which integrate work-based learning.

Boud et al argue that, with the delayering which has taken place in organisations, leading to increased demands on employees, productive reflection is particularly important (2006, 3). They point out that the reduction in bureaucracy and the more fluid, changing nature of occupations means that, ‘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, for the employer the professional development of employees is a form of ‘upskilling’. It is a way of ‘home growing’ the required skills and expertise. For the employee, in a national policy context which emphasises the requirement for a flexible workforce to support the economy, personal and professional development is increasingly important to support career progression. Formal qualifications are also seen to be important and there is 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.

There is currently increasing pressure on the university to engage with employers, and a range of collaborative activities is taking place. These include consultancy, whereby the university provides expertise and knowledge transfer to business organisations, for example through working on particular projects to solve specific problems, or providing forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Consultancy frequently focuses on problem solving or knowledge production, and 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, newer kind of engagement with employers takes the form of academic programmes and awards which integrate a

range of practice and work-based learning experiences. This ‘radical model’ of workplace learning, whereby curriculum content is drawn from the workplace and uses the direct professional experience of the learner, has stimulated considerable debate. Concern is expressed about the status of such learning – can higher level academic learning take place outside the university? Academics supporting work-based learners are very much aware of the need to demonstrate that learning in the workplace provides learning equivalent to that on programmes delivered within the university, and adopt pedagogies to ensure that this is the case.

Reflection on Learning

In integrating experience from the workplace into academic awards it is the learning which is the focus of assessment, not experience per se – learners must demonstrate that they can achieve the necessary standards through learning in context. How do they do this? When considering the university perspective on experiential learning and reflection, it becomes apparent that even though ‘all education comes about through experience [this] does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative’ (Dewey cited in Criticos, 2006, 162). In contrast to the general use of the term ‘reflection’ which often means thinking carefully about something, the reflection on experience undertaken in higher education is a formal process which involves using theory to inform experience, and the submission of written materials for assessment. It is through the submission of work to be assessed that experiential learners demonstrate the appropriate standard of achievement for higher education.

Productive Reflection in the Workplace

It appears that Boud et al use the term productive reflection in the less formal sense to mean a process in which groups gather together to think carefully about something. There is no mention of any formal process for supporting such learning and the outcome of any productive reflection in the workplace is not assessed. The key innovation of the concept is that it ‘emphasises the social collective aspects of reflection – people reflecting together in the workplace’ (2006, 6). Since Boud argues that the over-formalization of reflection processes in the workplace ‘provokes resistance and can inhibit learning’ it is likely that he envisages a relatively informal process the product of which provides benefits to both organisation and individual.

It is widely accepted that the informal social production of knowledge in the workplace is an important element in the effective functioning of organisations, and that individuals learn a considerable amount in the course of their professional practice. However, designing programmes to build on such learning provides a challenge for the academics involved. Boud is aware of the difficulties faced in attempting to alert those in the workplace to the practice and concept of reflection, regardless of whether it be individual or collective. 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). An example of this is given by Bjerlov and Docherty who, when writing of their project in the workplace, report that, even when directly undertaking reflective activities, workers avoided the term 'reflection' (2006, 102). Also, Gherardi and Poggio point out that, although a range of collective reflection takes place through 'debriefing sessions, project follow up and evaluation sessions, continuous improvement sessions, and weekly group meetings', it is not explicitly identified as 'reflection' (2006, 202). Moreover, Stebbins et al report that learning and reflection were not seen to be important when they tried to introduce them as part of a change programme (Stebbins et al, 2006, 88). It is likely that reflection, which requires a slowing of pace in order to actively analyse and evaluate practice, appears somewhat at odds with the action-oriented culture of the workplace.

In the discussions of collective reflection it is also difficult to get a precise perspective on how it provides benefits to individuals. This may be what causes concern to Breidensjo and Huzzard when they claim that when collective reflection and learning are undertaken in the workplace, the 'crucial distinction between learning through exploitation and learning through exploration is not generally made' (2006, 151). Such 'learning' can be therefore be designed to be 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, this instrumental and targeted learning is unlikely to offer the workplace learner a learning experience which can meet the standards required for recognition by higher education, and may not offer a real learning experience at all.

Productive Reflection and Academic Reflection

It is, however, interesting to consider whether it is possible to include in collective productive reflection elements which would support individual developmental learning. This would, of course, require a more structured approach to be taken to the reflective process, with the previously claimed risk of disrupting workplace practice. However, possibly a more relevant issue in terms of achieving higher level learning is the need for individuals to demonstrate a critical approach during any activities undertaken as part of their studies. Such an approach, in addition to meeting criteria relevant to higher education, avoids 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 an educational element into productive reflection could introduce factors that would impede its effectiveness for employers.

In order for experience-based workplace learning to support the development of the graduate skills which are the goal of higher education, the adoption of a critical stance by the learner/employee is a necessary element of the learning experience. However, 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’ (Ellstrom, 2006, 54). In addition, critical 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). A situation could therefore be envisaged where critical reflection leads to challenge and disruption in the workplace. However, it may be that the focus on individual practice reduces this risk by raising awareness and understanding of the complexity of any work context and the constraints existing there.

Reflection on individual practice is primarily self reflection, rather than reflection directed outwards at an ongoing situation; it is more difficult to analyse one’s own learning experience than to think about an external situation. This is clearly recognised 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). Such a practice 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. 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' (Boxer, 1985, 126).

The foregoing discussion indicates the difficulty of ensuring that any reflective exercise is of benefit to the learner, and flags up the sophistication and challenge of achieving developmental learning through experience (also see Walsh 2007, Walsh 2008(a), Walsh 2008(b), Walsh 2009(a), Walsh 2009(b)). 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.

There is a growing scholarship and discourse relating to the support and facilitation of experience-based learning in the workplace and elsewhere. Yet this requires a different form of academic expertise to that exercised when teaching formal courses within the university. When Schon was emphasising the importance of reflection-in-practice and reflection-on- practice in ensuring effective professional education, he emphasised the necessity of awarding adequate professional recognition to the academic practice needed to support reflection. 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 professional recognition of the role which he called 'coach', but which has variously been called advisor, consultant, tutor etc. (1987, 171). Schon was discussing the practicum which was integrated as part of a practice placement in a conventional full-time 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

Many of the activities outlined by Boud et al fall into the category of informal reflection, and no instances are given 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. Boud et al express concern that collective reflective could be used with adverse consequences for employees. Examples given 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' (Bredensjo 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 to design academic programmes building on workplace activities, the university's focus on the fundamental importance of individual learning and development can offset the risk of employee exploitation. The emphasis on individual development ensure a balance between the 'three party knowledge interests' in work-based learning.

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.
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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

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