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Work-based learning: A new higher education?

D. Boud, N. Solomon (Eds.)

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As Simon Marginson in *Markets in Education* (1997) and many others have pointed out, the environment within which tertiary education is provided has been transformed. The removal of regulations, introduction of competency based industry driven training and reduction of public funding has meant that the market imperative now dominates the landscape. It has crept insidiously into the halls of the most hallowed institutions, and reshaped education, perhaps irreversibly.

The subject matter of this book, '*Work-based learning: A new higher education*' sits at the centre of these changes. These changes have occurred within tertiary institutions primarily since the trend towards the marketisation of education began in the 1980s. Work-based Learning (WBL) embraces the rhetoric of the 'new right' and earlier OECD policies on education and its relationship to the economy, as well as the calls for reform relating to the impact of technology and post-Taylorist work practices. However, also woven throughout the book is the presence of the traditional aspirations and concerns of educationalists for access and equity. This gives the book a tension that, to my mind, is never really resolved at any point.

Given the nature of this book perhaps this end result is not unreasonable. After all, Raymond Williams in his 1960 book *The long revolution* (1960), identifies the same kinds of tensions that have shaped the nature of education since formalised education first began to be implemented. He argues that a democratic, humanistic citizenship argument influenced education alongside an argument built around the needs of industry or capitalism. He goes on to point out that "The democratic and industrial arguments are both sound but the great persuasiveness of the latter led to the definition of education in terms of future adult work ..." (p.162). In other words, he argued that the tension between the two arguments is most often resolved in favour of the needs of industry.

Overview

The purpose of the book is dual in nature. One of its purposes is to act as a companion to the book *Working Knowledge: The new vocationalism of higher education* (Symes and McIntyre, 2000). This book considers the broader context of work-based learning (WBL), explores the drivers that led to its creation and was produced by the same research group, 'Research on Adult and Vocational Learning', located within the University of Technology in Sydney, that produced this book under review. Quite naturally then its other purpose, as a companion to a book that scopes the broader context, is: to explore the specifics of WBL; to provide a framework for its implementation; and to provide "a foundation for further exploration and research" (p.4). It explains briefly, what it is, how it came into being and supplies case studies outlined in-depth, to serve as guides for implementation and experimentation of

WBL, to establish best practice, for those brave enough to want to follow in these pioneer footsteps. It is important to note, however, that it is not a how-to-do-it-book.

The content of the book primarily reflects its contributors and the role they have within their institutions. There are seventeen contributors, of which five are women. They are from both Great Britain and Australia and all but two are from educational institutions.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one, 'Framing Work-based Learning' includes four chapters. I feel that these chapters are well integrated and flow nicely together. They introduce ideas that are explored and reinforced later in the book, which provides a framework for the second and third parts. Within this first part they attempt to define what WBL is, outline how it is distinct from other attempts to link education and the workplace together, explore its context, the challenges it presents, and how to create its curriculum and infrastructure.

After reading the first part, entitled 'Framing Work-based Learning', you are left with a clear understanding that the WBL authors are concerned with: learning that occurs entirely in the workplace through a partnership between the educational institution, the employer organisation and the student/employee. The authors argue that this partnership is pivotal to ensure that the WBL is not only for the elite but is accessible by most employees within the employer/organisation partnered. This concept presents many challenges to each of the parties involved. The challenges presented to the university staff is how to make the curriculum work, firstly, for the organisation, in order to meet their economic needs and, secondly, for the employees in order to make their qualification transferable. One of the challenges presented to the employer is the constraints of the University system. In other words, the administration and the process of committee based decision-making. By far the most important challenges are those posed to the employee. The employee must be self-directed with only occasional meetings with supervisors rather than classes and they must accommodate the new requirements of WBL in their typical worklife and more worryingly in their homelife. (work on challenge part) These challenges, however, are not always addressed fully by the material presented in either section one or in the case study section.

The purpose of the second part of the book, entitled 'Case Studies', is to provide a platform for the case studies. The first three chapters (5-7) begin well, they link into one another as the first explains how WBL could not have come into being without the presence of modular (CBT based) learning that is linked onto a framework and the entrance of recognition of prior learning. The second relates how it can, and has, worked initially and the third reflects on this. All three are from Britain and all three reflect insights taken from the earliest stages of its implementation there. After the first three chapters, the case studies no longer deal with the history and development of WBL but rather how it works within each author's institution. Unfortunately, this creates a disjointness that gives a feel of fragmentation to the section of this part of the book. These studies are taken from a variety of perspectives and locations: from traditional liberal humanistic (Chapter 9) to that of a workplace (Chapters 8 and 11) and from Australian (Chapters 10 and 11) as well as British locations.

The purpose of the third part of the book, entitled 'Past, Present and Future', is to review the current context of WBL. The first chapter (Chapter 14) addresses many of the issues raised in the case studies and examines the contextual environment of WBL. The second chapter (Chapter 15) links back to the introduction, outlines the nature of the relationship between the parties and more importantly identifies areas for research and investigation.

Overall, the book explores several themes that are in the form of questions, no doubt to keep in tune with the title's question mark. They are stated on the first page of the first chapter: What is work-based learning and what is it trying to do? What examples exist of the practices it is promoting? What are the issues involved? What problems and difficulties need to be addressed if it is to be effective? I am particularly interested in the book's exploration of these last two themes as they expose the important tension I have mentioned earlier, that is, the tension between the vision of lifelong learning eschewed by the OECD from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s and the vision which embraced the notions of access and equity. Chapter 14 in particular reflects this discourse explicitly and explains its role in the context of WBL.

The major weaknesses in the book are threefold: the lack of consideration/coverage given to the perspective of the students, the problems that managerial prerogative causes the students and the seemingly complete acceptance of the market imperative and its influence on the tertiary system.

Given the on-going tension around lifelong learning and equity issues, hinted at above, it seems to me that one of the most important elements left out of this book is the perspective of the student. Nowhere in the case studies do the authors discuss how WBL is evaluated by the students except in the form of reflective practices that are encouraged to complete as part of the curriculum. The isolation of the students is glossed over simply by stating that those in a large business should be encouraged to form study groups. Where is the information which discusses how this impacts on the lives of these workers? They not only have to do their job but now have to do assignments that reach beyond the needs of their immediate duties to further develop their company rather than themselves. Although their WBL might be locked into a career path, what is not so clear is how it is locked into their personal development.

(need to work on points of this para) In addition, many authors frame their discussions in terms of the company rather than the student. From the case studies, it is clear that some organisations do respond to the challenge of making education meaningful to the employee. Some at least ensure that it is portable on their country's qualifications framework. However, there is little discussion in this book that WBL may simply intensify the learners' work, rather than extend their potential in meaningful ways. There is also little recognition that a transdisciplinary hot patch may result from a learners' participation in WBL. This does not make the learning easily portable into another institution nor into more formalised education programmes.

A second weakness in the book concerns its lack of discussion of managerial prerogative, that is, the inherent inequity of power to the advantage of management in the employer/manager – employee relationship. Throughout the book, there is a dominant argument that the partnership model is essential to ensure that education does not go to the elite. They do not acknowledge that most companies that have the

ability to train their workforces to this extent have already ensured that their workforce is an 'elite' in other words these students are already in a situation of privileged position. WBL is not accessible by all. It is provided primarily by a particular kind of corporate company that invests in training and is willing to work with tertiary institutions.

As well, the book does not adequately explore that possibility that educational providers may function primarily to serve managerial prerogatives in order to ensure a long-term partnership with the company in return for a constant supply of student numbers to boost their enrollments. This kind of discussion of the impact of market competition on tertiary institutions is an important one and sadly lacking. When they avoid this kind of analysis, the authors do not acknowledge the inherent inequity in the employment relationship. Those who wish to pursue social justice would wish to alter this inequity but nowhere do any of the authors mention union involvement or any other kind of collective employee input.

Finally, I consider it a weakness that the book seems to accept the market imperative and its influence on the tertiary system. Because it is based on an individualised conception of education, it necessarily is shaped by, and supports, the ideas of the 'new right', particularly those that relate to the free market, individual freedom and choice (King, 1987). But this ideology that shaped the education system to the point where this kind of learning becomes viable even necessary, is not identified nor dealt with. For this the authors might be forgiven for it is more the task of its companion book to deal with context. However, since they do not acknowledge the underlying political ideology of the new right, they provide no guiding light to those who would attempt to redress its impact and reshape their thinking. This critique may be harsh but I think that the authors have to explore their ideas beyond the defense of their curriculum or call themselves training consultants rather than educationalists.

The book is not without its strengths. One of the strengths is the case studies and the strong, clear examples that they give of the challenges to be encountered in the world of WBL. Another is the way in which the chapters set out the context and gel together with the chapters in the last section. This, I think, is a clever product of common authorship which threads key ideas, to different degrees, through the first and last section. The book does attempt to resolve the immediate problems that have arisen under WBL but ultimately, however, the way that the book does this also reveals its weakness.

In the end, I do not feel that the practices outlined in the book encourage post-compulsory education to mediate between capitalism and social democracy but rather to act as a creature of capitalism. Therefore, I do not think that this book extends the search for social justice even though it does discuss the potential of WBL to provide further pathways into tertiary education institutions and therefore extend opportunities for lifelong learning.

However, in my opinion the book does fulfil its purpose, it remains throughout a half-way house that provides, snippets of information to aid those who wish to implement WBL, and enough contextual information to aid those who wish to understand. No where does it purport to know the best and only way, it offers only suggestions as to

how to proceed, and presents models through the case studies for the reader to filter through in order to find what best practice suits their situation.

The ideas within the book are well-documented and have been explored at different times under different issues because I see WBL as another facet on the education debate that has raged since various education reforms such as CBT were first introduced under the need to make education more responsive to the needs of the economy and industry.

In sum, this book provides information to educationalists, employers and employees who wish to plunge into the challenging field of WBL. It also provides, for those of us that sit in our pockets of resistance, sunk in our worlds of tradition, a rationale to enable us to understand why such education could take place, even if it does not completely provide us with enough inspiration to leave the nest. Training and human resource practitioners who seek more innovative ways of training their workforce could also find this a useful resource as it explains an avenue that they may explore.

This book is particularly relevant to countries that have linked their education system to the needs of their economy and have introduced the policies and practices associated with CBT. These include a National Qualifications Framework that allows for portability and pathways, recognition of prior learning, modular learning with unit standards where the method of learning and delivery can be flexible but not the curriculum itself. Where countries do not have these types of systems in place it will be more difficult to implement the WBL presented in this book.

This book should be used as a guide to those who wish to implement WBL, as its insights allow the practitioner to be ready for potential problems and challenges, and it provides best practice for implementation. Furthermore, although I feel it has several serious weaknesses, the book does throw out a challenge to those who resist the market imperative in education. It does this by acknowledging that the policies and practices are here to stay and gives institutions another way of survival in an environment that offers less financial support than previously received in countries such as, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. This challenge lifts the book from a practical one, which offers examples of how to implement an education programme, to a book that adds to the growing debate of how tertiary institutions can survive the onslaught of the market imperative.

References

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Gemma Piercy
Dept of Sociology and Social Policy
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Waikato

Private Bag 3105
Hamilton
New Zealand
Email: gemma@waikato.ac.nz