

Workplace learning, knowledge, practice and transformation

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Abstract

The paper explores conceptualisations of workplace learning, knowledge and practice. It sets the discussion in its socio-economic context, one in which knowledge is seen as the route not only to societal competitiveness but also to wellbeing. Such arguments emphasise the turbulent environment in which work is set as well as the fluidity and rapidity in the transformation of knowledge. The paper examines the different ways in which knowledge is conceptualised within these debates, arguing that transformation is frequently set on a capitalist terrain rather than being tied to a radical political project.

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the way in which workplace and work-based learning (WBL), knowledge and practice are understood in contemporary discussions. In order to do this it is necessary to set the debate within the socio-economic context, which despite the current recession, remains one in which knowledge is seen as the route not only to societal competitiveness but also to its wellbeing. These arguments stress the turbulent environment in which waged labour is placed, one subject to rapid change in which workplace knowledge is continuously being transformed, necessitating learning new skills and knowledge. For writers such as Giddens (2000) and Beck (1999) the economic foundations of society have been transformed by the knowledge or information society which places a premium upon learning at work (and see Forrester, 2005, p970-1). Boud and Symes draw a distinction between work-based and workplace learning:

Work-based learning needs to be distinguished from workplace learning, that form of learning that occurs on a day-to-day basis at work as employees acquire new skills or develop new approaches to solving problems. No formal educational recognition normally accrues to such learning, whether or not it is organised systematically. The emergence of work-based learning acknowledges that work, even on a day-to-day basis, is imbued with learning opportunities (Garrick, 1998), heretofore not recognized as educationally significant or worthwhile. Work-based learning gives academic recognition to these opportunities, when suitably planned and represented. (2000, p14)

This paper does not explore WBL qualification frameworks and at times blurs the distinction between it and workplace learning. Boud and Symes are calling for the recognition of workplace learning as educatively significant and worthy of academic recognition. Whether or not this is achieved will be shaped by a series of issues and struggles at the site of waged labour and beyond.

Context

Really useful knowledge' was a knowledge of everyday circumstances, including a knowledge of why you were poor, why you were politically oppressed and why through the force of social circumstance, you were the kind of person you were, your character misshapen by a cruel competitive world. (Education Group, 1981, p37)

You move from one boring, dirty, monotonous job to another boring, dirty, monotonous job. And somehow you're supposed to come out of it all "enriched". But I never feel "enriched" – I just feel knackered (Nichols and Beynon, 1977, p16)

The first quotation is drawn from the work of Richard Johnson in which 'really useful knowledge' is set against 'useful knowledge' which can develop the productive potential of workers. The former anticipates the transformation of societal relations with the later anticipating the transformation of work processes. The second quotation is from Nichols and Beynon's 1970s study of a chemical plant. Both passages are salutary with the first drawing upon nineteenth century discussions of education, knowledge, work and transformation. The second drawn from the last century reflects a moment in which there was some concern with the humanisation of work and job enrichment. It is important to recognise that the interest in workplace learning, knowledge, practice and transformation has in various guises had a long history. After all it is pivotal to the on-going development of capitalism and capital's interest in variable labour power and value-added waged labour.

The current interest in learning at the workplace derives from at least two currents. First, there is the realisation that in societies such as Britain the majority of the workforce in 2020 will have already left full-time education (and see BIS, 2009, p5).

The fact that 70 per cent of the UK workforce of 2020 are already in work has increased its [workplace learning] saliency still further, since most are beyond the reach of schools and may be out of reach of further and higher education. (Felstead, *et al*, 2009, p3)

This is allied to the second current whereby the increasing speed of change means that a premium is placed upon workplace learning. These changes articulate with the ways in which workplace learning is conceived. Often, these conceptualisations are characterised by an optimistic if not progressive hue. Writers such as Billett (2005) argue that workplace learning serves the interests of social justice as a result of the recognition of worker skills and knowledge that are frequently overlooked and unacknowledged and that have remained outside the qualification system (and see Boud and Symes, 2000, p18). Such arguments would sit alongside those concerned with equal opportunity and access to educational credentials. Billett writes,

The kinds of occupational practice denied courses and certification are often low paid and characterised as being 'low skill' and occupied by disadvantaged groups...

Finding means to legitimately and authoritatively recognise skills acquired through work hold the prospect of providing **just arrangements** for these otherwise disadvantaged workers as well as those requiring recognition throughout their working life. [my emphasis] (Billett, 2005, p944)

In addition recent theorisations of workplace learning and the development of knowledge therein are similarly characterised by such a progressive hue. This operates with a model of justice that emphasises equal opportunity, access to educational credentials as well as recognising the skills and knowledge of workers who are frequently marginalised and overlooked. In this instance we come across arguments that emphasise the socially situated, collective and collaborative nature of workplace learning (see Beckett and

Hager, 2002, chapter 6). These notions are allied to the situatedness of this process as well as its socio-cultural basis. Here we encounter arguments that stress connectivity (Griffiths and Guile, 2003) and processes of expansive learning (Engeström, 2007; Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Fuller, *et al*, 2009b) as well as the ways in which these are aligned with new visualisations of current socio-economic conditions. In the case of connective models of work experience, Guile and Griffiths suggest:

Learners need to be encouraged to conceptualise their experiences in different ways and for this conceptualisation to serve different curriculum purposes. This is very similar to what Freire has defined (Freire and Macedo, 1999) as the role of the teacher – to create ‘pedagogic spaces’, in other words, to use his/her expertise to pose problems in order to help learners analyse their own experiences and arrive at a critical understanding of their reality. (2001, p125)

It is suggested that this pedagogic orientation towards work experience can serve to “provide an opportunity to develop the personal, social and behavioural skills that support personal and organisational learning” (Guile and Griffiths, 2001, p126). It is in this way, that such a pedagogy serves to develop the capabilities required by a fast changing knowledge economy. Such a stance shares a resemblance with that of Engeström (2007) and his arguments that the resolution of contradictions within and across activity systems can lead to expansive learning thereby resulting in the transformation of practice and the development of knowledge and learning (and see Fuller, *et al*, 2009a).

In the following I engage with a number of these arguments: touching on the importance of socially situated knowledge, considering notions of postmodernity, discussing some of the arguments concerned with workplace learning and conclude with a consideration of transformation. The salience of socially situated knowledge/practice and postmodernity is that they are linked by some writers either to a presumed radicalism or to the transformation of practice - presumably in more ‘effective’ and empowering ways. It is important to examine these arguments not only for their progressive but also for their socially transformative possibilities. I recognise that the authors discussed acknowledge

that not all workplace learning is progressive in their terms, nor transformative of work processes, and that some workplaces have no real requirement for learning, and that indeed it may be counterproductive or even inappropriate (Felstead *et al*, 2009, p5, p6).

Felstead *et al*, (2009) would argue that their *Working as Learning Framework* (WALF) sets workplace learning within a context that acknowledges complexity. It does this by locating workplace learning within three different theoretical traditions that can be used to explore the context in which learning may occur.

From economic theory, we focus on the ‘productive systems’ model of economic activity; from the sociology of work, we incorporate concepts of ‘discretion’ and ‘trust’ that have been developed in the understanding of social processes in employment relations; and from the literature on workplace learning, we highlight the ‘expansive-restrictive’ characteristics of ‘learning environments’ and individual ‘learning territories’. (Felstead *et al*, 2009, p18)

Each of the three theoretical positions enable an examination of different contexts for the workplace and the affordances these offer for learning. Thus these authors have developed a sophisticated analysis that acknowledges complexity and points towards a political economy of workplace learning that recognises conflict at the site of waged labour. Yet there is a tension in the analysis which easily folds into a stance that seeks to facilitate workforce development and the enhancement of organisational performance all of which is set on a capitalist terrain (Felstead *et al*, 2009, p206). This tension undermines the potential radicalism of their account and leads to its domestication.

Despite the recognition that not all contexts facilitate workplace learning and that not all learning is necessarily progressive with respect to social justice and the transformation and development of work processes. There is nevertheless a tendency within these accounts to implicitly value learning that arises in the workplace (Evans *et al*, 2006). At the same time there is a recognition of capitalism (see, Felstead *et al*, 2009) and the consequence of this for workplace relations, for example Evans *et al* write:

the research on which this book is based has aimed to examine learning within the socio-economic context of the workplace. The conflict embodied in the wage relationship and wider system for the management and regulation of employment frame our exploration of workplace learning. (2006, p3)

And in their preface they write,

Our focus was to develop research that could help improve learning in workplaces, with the following objectives:

1. To develop an interdisciplinary understanding of the context of workplace learning, which is characterised by the conflict embodied in the wage relationship and wider systems for the management and regulation of employment. (Evans, *et al*, 2006, pxi)

However, such insights are bracketed or linked to Taylorism and related to forms of performativity which are deemed problematic and antithetical to expansive learning (Evans et al, 2006, p61 and see Felstead et al, 2009). This tendency is frequently found in work that seeks to criticise current regimes of teaching and learning found within FE/HE but which stops short of a fully fledged critique of capitalism. For example, Pring *et al*, in their report on 14-19 education and training recommend that, “the impoverished language of ‘performance management’ needs to be challenged...” (2009, p25; and see Biesta and James, 2007).

Before engaging with the subsequent argument, it is important to acknowledge two important caveats. Firstly, workplaces can be important sites of collective learning and personal development. They can offer various progression routes leading to credentials and can generate knowledge creation. This recognition underpins the progressivism of the accounts explored in this paper. Secondly, it is necessary to acknowledge Beckett and Hager’s (2002) reprimand of the disdain of some educators and academics towards workplace learning, amongst whom I might figure. They suggest that,

against the traditional educators disdain for training, it will be argued that a richer notion, based on organic learning and arising from practical performance at work, is available to re-claim training as the core of any educational activity (Beckett and Hager, 2002, p32).

However, in spite of such progressive rhetoric, recent discussions of workplace learning and WBL, knowledge, practice and transformation seemed to be lodged on a very particular terrain which has specific consequences for the political implications of these analyses. This terrain, whilst critical of performativity and Taylorist forms of capitalist relations, is more sympathetic to workplace relations that seek to maximise labour value through the enhancement of variable labour power, as found for example in the ‘high performance workplace’ (Felstead, *et al*, 2009, p6-7). Waugh in his review of *Improving working as learning* (Felstead, *et al*, 2009) notes that the book “...is rather disappointing” and “one reason for this may be that it forms part of a series on ‘improving learning’” (2009, p18). It could be that this difficulty arises as a result of the tension between valuing WBL and workplace learning whilst acknowledging the conflictual capitalist relations in which it is located.

Socially situated knowledge

Elsewhere (Avis, 2004) I have argued that an engagement with social and situated practice has increasingly been linked with some sort of radical stance. In part this is a consequence of the failings of structural analyses of education many of which are informed by Marxism and partly because of the distance of such analyses from the immediacy of practice (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2003; and see James and Biesta, 2007). This position leads to an analysis that recognises complexity and indeterminacy at the site of practice and that is concerned with *phronesis* i.e., “practical judgement or wisdom (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2003, p247)”, or in Beckett and Hager’s terms, appropriateness. Hager, citing his work with Beckett (2000), comments,

We hypothesize that making better judgements represent a paradigmatic aim of work-based learning, and therefore growth in such learning is represented by a growing capacity to make appropriate judgements in the changing, and often unique, circumstances that occur in many current

workplaces. This scenario values not just the disciplinary knowledge that is central to the academic knowledge scenario, but includes also the diverse professional knowledge that is acquired from work performance. (Hager, 2000, p60)

This interest in social practice gains additional support from the way in which the socio-economic context is conceived in social theory (Beck, 1992, 1999; Castells, 2000a, b; Giddens, 2000). Such a stance derives from a recognition of complexity and sits alongside a critique of theories that operate with simplified and outdated understandings of the social structure. This in turn leads to an emphasis being placed upon socially situated practice as well as localised intervention (Bourdieu, 1988, 1992). Such conceptualisations readily lend themselves to positions that stress the local, seeing this as a potential site for the development of progressive, if not radical practices. It is within this ideational context that notions of situated learning and knowledge are located. Learning, knowledge and the on-going development of identity are placed within specific and localised work-based and educational practices. This position is reflected in Hager's earlier comment in which he suggested.

that making better judgements represent a paradigmatic aim of work-based learning... ['being] represented by a growing capacity to make appropriate judgements in the changing, and often unique, circumstances that occur in many current workplaces. (Hager, 2000, p60)

Thus "knowledge resides in individuals, teams and organisations" (Hager, 2000, p61). The significance of this apparently anodyne statement is that it serves to highlight the socially situated context in which knowledge is produced and points towards the specificity, situatedness and uniqueness of workplace knowledge.

There are a number of theoretical currents that share an interest in socially situated practice and the spaces this provides for learning as well as progressive, if not transformative development. This can be seen for example in: Brown *et al's* (1989), model of situated cognition, Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice, Latour's (2005) actor network theory (and see Clarke, 2008), together with

various versions of activity theory including Engeström's (2007). These approaches share a family resemblance, having a similar interest in learning and the apparently progressive development of socially situated and work based-practices. Not only do these approaches set themselves against the determinism, lack of complexity and pessimism of structural analyses, but also provide a critique of top-down state driven managerialism and similar forms of evidence-informed practice. This arises through the recognition of localised specificity and contingency, that is to say they acknowledge the situational specificity of work-based practices and their lack of generality. Evans *et al* write,

A strength of the situated perspective is that it treats learning transfer as problematic. If learning is conceived as a process embedded on particular social activities and relations, it follows that learning cannot straightforwardly be replicated from one situation or context to another. (2006, p28)

Thus for example a particular workplace will embody specific understandings of quality. That is to say, what constitutes acceptable performance as well as the appropriate dispositions of practitioners within particular workplaces (see for example Billett's 2008, discussion of Hairdressing). Thus at best the issue of transfer becomes one of re-contextualisation and the re-situating of practice which necessitates learning, the formation of new knowledge and possibly, identity.

Discussions of workplace learning face in two contradictory directions, one towards inclusion and notions of fairness and equal opportunity, and the other towards a version of the knowledge/information society. The latter is deemed to be the basis upon which the necessity for work-based learning resides. That is to say learning is set within particular contexts with knowledge being intimately linked to these. The turbulent environment in which many institutions are set demands rapid learning and thereby the development of new knowledge that responds to the requirements of particular settings and that thereby lacks generality and is situationally specific. Such conceptualisations inform the claims of writers like Rainbird *et al*, when they write:

The starting point for this paper is the idea that workplace learning ought to be central to any vision of the economy and society which is based on skills and knowledge. (2005, p885)

There are two points to be made. Firstly, knowledge and skill is embedded in the labour process and is present even within those activities which are thought to be unskilled and to require little or no training. However, such a suggestion is not new and is predicated upon the way in which skill and knowledge is conceived. In addition the new conditions facing the economy are thought to place a premium upon developing knowledge and skill in the workplace. This is overstated and implies that we will all become knowledge workers, it neglects the polarisation of skill within the workforce. Brown *et al* (2001) suggest the UK economy is characterised by a division between a small high skill sector of knowledge workers and a much larger low/semi-skilled one (and see Pring *et al*, 2009, Chapter, 9). In later work, in an analysis reminiscent of Braverman (1974), (Brown *et al* 2010, chapter 6) they point towards the development of digital Taylorism which serves to standardise the labour process of some knowledge workers. The suggestion that workplace learning is crucial for the development of knowledge and skill at the workplace is well made. Such knowledge and skill enables us to perform effectively at work, and for some at least, to survive its rigours. But to move beyond this, to link such processes to questions of social justice and the relationship of this to the knowledge economy, may be a step too far. The relationship between situational specificity and knowledge formation and learning may mean that either learning is tied to the workplace context or that there is an affinity between learning and the position of labour in capitalist societies. Paradoxically the relationship between the workplace and the situational specificity of knowledge points towards the transformation of workplace practices and productive processes - the detail of the labour process. Learning derived from the position of labour in capitalism can anticipate the development of really useful knowledge. Such knowledge has a certain generality in that it starts to lay bare capitalist relations, presaging societal transformation. The paradox is that the progressivism of those accounts that have been explored in this paper which focus upon workplace learning and the transformation of work processes may inadvertently serve to secure the interest of capital rather than anticipating the transformation of societal relations. In other words this

type of workplace learning develops variable labour power as against the development of 'really useful knowledge'.

The post modern age

This section touches on arguments that construe knowledge as deriving from localised practices. Such arguments are set against the 'conservatism' of academic forms of knowledge critiqued for their sterility and lack of responsiveness to the immediacy and demands of the workplace, operating within turbulent and fast changing environments. Herein rests a particular understanding of knowledge which draws on elements found in the critique of modernity and sits with the move away from simple modernity to reflexive modernisation (Beck, 1998; Giddens, 1998). Such arguments are also found in what Gibbons *et al* (2002) describe as the movement from mode 1 disciplinary based knowledge to mode 2, characterised by interdisciplinarity (and see Nowotny, *et al*, 2002). Smith and Webster describe this transformation as,

... a move away from ... mode 1 knowledge which is homogeneous, rooted in strong disciplines which are hierarchical... to mode 2 knowledges which are non-hierarchical, pluralistic, transdisciplinary, fast changing, and socially responsive to a diversity of needs such as students' dispositions and industrial priorities. (Smith and Webster, 1997, p104)

Similarly Chappell *et al*, (2000) suggest this conceptualisation,

... appear[s] to unsettle modern understandings of knowledge by reversing the traditional binaries that privilege one form of knowledge construction over its 'other'. Today, epistemological discourses emphasize knowledge constructed as practical, interdisciplinary, informal, applied and contextual over knowledge constructed as theoretical, disciplinary, formal, foundational and generalisable. (Chappell *et al*, 2000, p137)

The distinction between mode 1 mode 2 knowledge can be overstated, having a longer history than at first appears, being reflected in the distinction between applied and 'pure' disciplines (Usher, 2000). Nevertheless the putative movement towards mode 2 knowledge rests with understandings of work that draw upon the rhetoric of the

knowledge/information society, as well as importantly, those accounts that stress the socially situatedness and specificity of workplace knowledge and practice. Biesta *et al* (2007) drawing upon their ESRC study of further education argue that ‘what works’ in the classroom ‘is often localised and context specific’ and that therefore what works for one teacher with a particular group of students may not transfer readily to another group (p147). Such an insight is reflected in many accounts that stress the specificity of workplace practices. Hammersley (2001) whilst discussing evidence-based practice has stressed the impossibility of educational theory being able to capture the complexity of the classroom. David Hargreaves (2004), as a result of his emphasis upon development over research, similarly stresses such complexity, one echoed in the UK government’s Innovation Unit’s interest in *Next Practice* (Hanlon, 2007). *Next Practice* seeks to acknowledge the complexity of educational relations and the important role practitioners play in educational improvement by drawing upon and recognising their local knowledge and pedagogic skill.

By ‘Next Practice’ we mean: practice which is potentially more powerful than current ‘good [best] practice’; in advance of hard evidence of effectiveness, but informed by research, and developed through skilled and informed practitioners. (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Innovation Unit n.d. p5)

Such situationally based analyses are reflected in the work of Beckett and Hagger (2002). They describe their position as strategic postmodernist and draw our attention to the flux and contingent nature of workplace practices that call for the development of local, site specific forms of learning and knowledge that are played out in practical judgements made at the site of waged labour. But even when knowledge and skill is drawn from outside the workplace it will necessarily be re-contextualised to fit that specific situation. In these forms of analysis there is a lurch towards a relativism which is partly reflected in situational specificity and the manner in which learning and knowledge is adapted to the contexts in which it is both processually developed and applied (see discussion Muller, 2009; Young, 2009).

Although there is something of a rupture, these arguments have an affinity with the suggestion that value-added waged labour is the key to competitiveness and that high skilled, high trust, high waged working relations will create the conditions in which continuous improvement can take place. This sits alongside an allied argument that variable labour power, at whatever level, contributes towards the generation of surplus value - which is another way of saying effective workplace practices. Beckett and Hagger's (2002, p48-54) study of care workers working with those suffering from dementia would be a case in point as, would Fuller *et al's* (2007, p749) study of van drivers delivering sandwiches. Both groups of workers draw upon locally derived learning and knowledge to perform their tasks more effectively in a process akin to continuous improvement. Despite an explicit recognition of the conflictual basis of work relations there is nevertheless a tendency to down play social antagonism at the site of waged labour in this type of research. Consequently such analyses veer towards a consensual stance.

In some cases there is a bracketing of social antagonism or a process of 'othering', where antagonism becomes located elsewhere in the performative structures of the state or in inappropriate Taylorised forms of work organisation. Such a stance is present in Shain and Gleeson's (1999) discussion of strategic compliance, the implication being that performativity and the over use of targets is deeply problematic with strategic compliers building upon the progressive possibilities derived from the context in which they are placed (and see Wind-Cowie and Olliff-Cooper, 2009). Importantly, strategic compliers can be drawn from any level and in the case of English Further Education Colleges could be principals, middle managers as well as rank and file lecturers. The consequence of such a stance is that the social antagonisms surrounding work relations are somehow wished away being replaced by a consensus whereby we work with others on the 'good side' of the conditions we face.

Expansive Learning

In the following I touch on arguments that relate to workplace learning, but first it is useful to reiterate some of the points made earlier. Workplace processes may lead both to

learning as well as the production of knowledge. There is a relationship between these processes and worker identity and disposition, which in turn act back upon learning, knowledge production and work practices. Early studies in the sociology of work illustrate the way in which workers made sense of and understood work relations, developing various strategies to accommodate working conditions. Nichols and Beynon's (1977) study would be a case in point. Earlier I indicated that a number of contemporary writers had developed a rigorous critique of work based practices lodged within neo-liberal notions of performativity and managerialism, all of which were set within a capitalist logic. Here performativity and managerialism are seen as inhibitors that get in the way of vibrant, engaged and creative workplace learning and knowledge production. This in turn is thought to jeopardise workplace effectiveness and is frequently seen as deriving from the application of outdated and inappropriate management practices. Yet such analyses go no further than this. I am reminded of the clash between Taylor's scientific management and Mayo's school of human relations (Silverman, 1970). It is here that a recognition of sociological work that has addressed the labour process and management practices becomes important. Whilst Felstead, *et al's*, (2009) *Working as Learning Framework* (WALF) draws upon the sociology of work in their analysis of workplace learning there is a tension in their account that downplays social antagonism at the site of waged labour. This derives from their primary interest in learning at work and a concern with examining organisational contexts that facilitate learning.

Edwards (1980) illustrates the way in which management strategies are in part derived from the balance of force between capital and labour as well as a number of other considerations. In this context performativity becomes but one strategy amongst a number with 'apparently' democratic practices being yet another. The point is that the relation between capital and labour remains the same, albeit softened within the latter practice. Nevertheless, whilst hidden social antagonisms between labour and capital remain in place, these become visible, through redundancy and wage reductions in times such as now, of recession (Sennett, 1998; 2006). We need only to reflect back on processes of de-industrialisation that took place in the 1980s as well as the current restructuring of the public services in Ireland, the UK and elsewhere. In these instances

workers who may have engaged with apparently democratic practices meet up with the 'reality' of working in capitalist societies.

Although in writing that addresses expansive learning at the site of waged labour, the preceding argument may be recognised and possibly accepted. However, this becomes bracketed and is put to one side having its salience undermined by the prevailing socio-economic conditions. Within such approaches there is an implicit understanding of the knowledge/information society in which there is an emphasis on the creativity of the worker and their ability to add value. In this context workplace learning and knowledge development seem to be construed as a win-win situation, one in which both capital and labour benefit. However, current conditions raise questions about these bracketings as well as the suggestion that we are operating in qualitatively different conditions to those of the recent past. However, such issues are sidelined by the interest in workplace learning and the concern with examining workplaces that facilitate learning and knowledge production (see for example, Felstead, *et al*, 2009). It is possible the writers I critique would suggest I am asking the wrong questions, or rather, directing inappropriate questions to their work and that they are fully aware of the wider socio-economic context of workplace learning but wish to emphasise learning and knowledge creation at work. They might even suggest that whilst I might construe such practices as creating useful knowledge, the dichotomy between this and really useful knowledge is somewhat overdrawn. For example, Fuller and Unwin (2003) discuss and contrast expansive learning cultures and environments with those that are more restrictive (see table 1). Their notion of expansive learning echoes Engeström's.

The object of expansive learning activity is the entire activity system in which the learners are engaged. Expansive learning activity produces culturally new patterns of activity. Expansive learning at work produces new forms of work activity. (Engeström, 2001, p139)

Table 1

Learning Culture/Environment

| Expansive | Restrictive |
|---|--|
| Widely distributed skills | polarised distribution of skills |
| Technical skills valued | Technical skills taken for granted |
| Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued | Knowledge and skills of key workers/groups developed and valued |
| Crossdisciplinary groups/ communication encouraged | Bounded communication and work |
| Manager/supervisor as enabler | Manager as controller |
| Pursuit of formal qualifications valued/ supported | Pursuit of formal qualifications not valued or supported/ or seen as tangential to business need |
| Chances to learn new jobs/skill | lack of workplace mobility |
| Expanded job design | restricted job design |
| Bottom-up approach to innovation | top-down approach to innovation |
| Formative approach to evaluation | summative approach to evaluation |
| Individual progression encouraged; strong internal labour market | weak internal labour market; recruitment usually from outside to meet skill needs |
| Learning culture/learning environment (Evans <i>et al</i> , 2006, fig 3.2 p61) | |

There are several points to make about restrictive and expansive learning cultures and environments. The restrictive is set within managerialist, performative and Taylorist contexts and readily opens itself up to a critique of technical rationality. Interventions based on technical rationality and a Taylorist logic are bound to fail as they play down

the complexity surrounding locally based workplace practices. We could consider this in terms of the critique of evidence informed practices in education and Hammersley's argument, that acknowledging complexity means that there is no direct relationship between research evidence and the development of good practice. Such suggestions sit with critiques of performativity which suggest it precludes the creative engagement of workers.

However, the logic of such technicised concerns can nevertheless readily be aligned with expansive learning's concern with on-going and continuous improvement in workplace practices. In this case, to the extent that managerialism, performativity and Taylorism jeopardise this aspiration, they can be deemed irrational as a result of their denial and inability to handle complexity. Hammersley (2005), in a discussion of rationality, writes "‘rational action’, of which objectivity is one form, can be defined as ‘pursuing a goal in the most effective way possible’" (p149). In addition whilst restrictive environments may inhibit particular forms of workplace learning they may open-up other forms of learning and knowledge production at the site of waged labour. Understandings about the nature of work, exploitation and oppression within capitalist society are forms that tend to be discounted and marginalised in the literature (Shilling, 1988). However, it could be suggested that such notions are rather more about the social relations of work than the actuality of the labour process. Yet the two activities are closely intertwined with much of the current workplace learning literature emphasising expansive learning. The debate is lodged within a framework in which expansive learning contexts are construed as ‘good’. However, such a stance can easily fold into one that lends itself to the intensification of the labour process - we only need to reflect on the academic labour process. More generally Levitas reflects these tensions in her argument that;

What is described as a ‘lifetime entitlement to learning’ is effectively a lifetime obligation to acquire and maintain marketable skills. (Levitas, 1999, p121)

By default social antagonism at the site of waged labour is played down, that is to say, the extraction of surplus value/labour and our complicity with such processes in

workplace practices. I am reminded of Rikowski's (1999) notion of the 'human made capital', the idea that we introject the contradictions of capitalism and so become complicit, not only in the exploitation and oppression of others, but also of ourselves. This also sits alongside Edwards' (1980) discussion of managerial strategies and technologies of control that range from the Taylorist to those based on responsible autonomy. However, such strategies are effectively lodged within a consensual framework that is focused on the development of labour power to produce surpluses. In other words there is a concern to discipline labour so as to develop appropriate forms of subjective dispositions which facilitate the production of surpluses.

Transformism: towards a conclusion

The Marxist notion of transformation carries two distinct meanings, one of which emphasises the dynamic and 'revolutionary' aspects of capitalism. Schumpeter (1975) referred to this as 'creative destruction', echoing Marx and Engels' argument.

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society... Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguished the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all newly-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. (Marx and Engels, 1973, p38)

Secondly transformation can also refer to fundamental changes in society. However, to the extent that the work I have considered is concerned with transformation it rests with changing the labour process, developing useful knowledge and 'improving' productive processes. There is an echo of earlier debates which often assumed that labour processes based upon post-fordist relations would carry with them high trust, high skill, high wages as well as importantly, increased levels of job satisfaction (Avis, 1997; Brown and Lauder, 1992). This is mirrored by the implicit suggestion that workplace learning contexts should be transformed in the direction of expansive learning environments.

Whilst for many workers this may offer more fulfilling work and greater levels of autonomy, it may also contribute to increased self-surveillance whereby we are enjoined to continually re-invent ourselves to fit the demands of the productive system thereby developing ‘useful knowledge’.

There is a transformist thrust to these arguments, set as they are within a capitalist logic. To the extent that that they are concerned with transformation this is located within capitalist relations and thus their radicalism is somewhat limited (Gramsci, 1971; Johnson and Steinberg, 2004), and in Hayes’ (2003, p38) terms veer towards a species of ‘comfort radicalism’. At best they call for the humanisation of work and whilst acknowledging conflict at the site of wage relations this becomes marginalised, with the antagonistic social relations of work being occluded and located within a consensual framework. Warmington (2008) in his discussion of Engeström’s version of activity theory writes:

within any activity system, the primary contradiction resides not in the use- and exchange-value of general commodities (such as doctor’s medicines) that may be utilised as tools or produced as outcomes but in what Marx(1883/1976) termed the “other great class of commodity”: labour-power (cf. Rikowski, 2000a). This has implications for the practical application of activity theory in work-related research, since it suggests that, regardless of the specific, momentary object of a particular activity (such as the development of specific services, goods or practices), the ‘object’ of an activity system is also the expansion of labour power, or rather labour-power *potential*. (Warmington, 2008, p3-4)

The object of workplace learning is the ‘expansion of labour power’ thereby facilitating the development of useful knowledge. During this process contradictions and conflicts may arise, however the thrust of workplace learning research is to domesticate these. Perhaps what we need is a ‘really’ expansive notion of workplace learning, one that locates this within a political economy of waged labour that centres social antagonism. In this instance workplace learning would relate to the lived experience of waged labour and set this within the wider context of capitalist relations. The point is that whilst not all workplaces provide opportunities for the ‘learning’ of knowledge and skill, thereby developing variable labour power, they do nevertheless provide opportunities for learning

about work within capitalism and in this sense can lead to the development of really useful knowledge that could contribute towards struggles to transform societal relations. However, in the work I have considered such aspirations are at best marginalised and at worst ignored. This is because the progressivism of this work is rooted within notions of access, the provision of opportunity and recognition that whilst offering glimpses of a radical critique, it more readily folds over into a stance that accepts capitalist relations.

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