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WORK-BASED LEARNING IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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Abstract

Although most U.S. institutions of higher education now make appreciable use of work-based learning options, their attention to experiential education as a learning vehicle is relatively limited. The connection between the work experience and the on-campus curriculum is only loosely formed, and students are not often given a chance to reflect concurrently and collectively on their workplace lessons. Some changes in higher educational policy have been initiated to augment the pedagogical contribution of a work-based learning, but notable institutional barriers remain.

Although there have been many ways of referring to work-based learning as a component of higher educational policy, most definitions consider it to be constituted of relatively structured activities occurring in the workplace that equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to succeed at work and in society. Students learn by doing real work that is often designed to support and integrate with learning in the classroom and also to promote the acquisition of broad transferable skills. By equipping young adults with work-related skills, work-based learning promotes a high level of work role identification and efficacy, which in turn positively influences their successful transition into the work environment (Ng and Feldman, 2007; Raelin, 2008). Students make sense out of their workplace experiences and construct knowledge through a process of negotiation between these experiences and their own cognitive frameworks (Billett, Smith, and Barker, 2005; von Glasersfeld, 2008).

Program Variety

Work-based learning has made its way into U.S. higher education policy, though not only through the expression, “work-based learning.” The words, “experiential education,” have been used perhaps ever since John Dewey (1938) invoked that there is “an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education.” The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) has taken up the mantle by promulgating a mission to foster the effective use of

experience as an integral part of education in order to empower learners and promote the common good.

Experiential education via work-based learning is now advanced by a number of different institutions in the U.S. Most programs involve partnerships between the school, the organization providing the work opportunity, and, of course, the student. Programs are offered using diverse formats and can vary based on such considerations as whether there is a link between the work experience and the student's major or whether the student takes classes concurrent with the placement. Many of the program variants are offered independently from one another and receive institutional support from professional associations apart from the school. So, for example, cooperative education is supported by the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE), internships by the Cooperative Education and Internship Association (CEIA), service learning by Campus Compact, study abroad by the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), to name just a few. Each of the activities has its own functional orientation - for example, clinical practice is usually sanctioned through explicit pedagogical guidelines specified within the allied health professions – and they tend to subscribe to particular quality standards. For example, the parties mutually plan for successful experiences through placements that seek to maximize learning. The students' participation is actively monitored and assessed both by the school authorities and through supervision within the worksite. There is attention paid to safety and, of course, to compliance with state and federal labor laws. Many of these modalities provide opportunities for reflection. Students either are paid for their services or receive academic credit, and in some cases, receive accreditation for prior learning and experience.

Formal Policymaking

The introduction of work-based learning into the higher education curricula through formal policymaking in the U.S. has been relatively limited. Although there has been a prodigious allocation of federal and state funds for vocational and technical education, for example, most of these funds are spent on traditional forms of classroom training, although they may be delivered at the workplace. However, in 1994, federal legislation called The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, though now

phased out, set in motion activities that were classified specifically as work-based compared to those termed school-based learning. In addition, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 (Perkins III) promotes the use of work-based learning and new technologies in tech-prep programs and encourages partnerships with business, labor organizations, and institutions of higher education that award baccalaureate degrees (Work-BasedLearning.Org, 2009).

Third Sector Influence

Higher education policy can also be shaped by the third sector (including charities, foundations, and social enterprises) in the U.S. An interesting example of the application of work-based learning within the foundation arena is the Jobs to Careers program supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in collaboration with the Hitachi Foundation. It seeks to advance the skill and career development of incumbent workers providing care and services on the front lines of health care systems. These workers represent a diverse group, such as medical assistants, health educators, laboratory technicians, substance abuse counselors, and home health aides, practicing in such settings as acute care hospitals, long-term care institutions, behavioral and community health clinics, and public and community health organizations. They are also a vast population of some 4.7 million people in the United States, and though they perform work critical to the viability of the nation's health care system, their learning opportunities and career advancement are currently limited, leading to their short supply and rapid turnover. The Jobs to Careers initiative seeks to address the career plight of these workers through a number of human resource strategies, prominent among which is the use of work-based learning strategies. The program requires partnerships between employers and educational institutions to develop learning opportunities through work and within the workday. By capturing, documenting, and rewarding learning that occurs on the job, it hopes to establish academic credit or industry-recognized credentials for achievement.

As an example, mental health technicians in one community residence refined their case management skills while earning a certification in Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation. Their supervisors were also trained to co-develop and observe the technicians' learning objectives. The program

incorporated some didactic instruction and fieldwork and articulated with Bachelors and Masters level degrees (Jobs to Careers, 2009; Wilson, 2006).

Lessons Learned

With work-based learning now in the 21st Century playing an increasing role in educational provision, what lessons have we learned to ensure it makes a valuable contribution to both youth and adult education? First, early assessments of school-to-work programs have reinforced the now familiar logic that work-based learning activities be well-coordinated with the classroom. Work-based and school-based learning should not be segmented. In other words, work-based activities are not meant to be accomplished once students have learned their lessons. Rather, they offer an opportunity for students to apply their classroom principles immediately into work as well as to reflect on their work practices.

Another lesson for educational policy is that as Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) once warned, "Simply placing young people in workplaces does not guarantee that they will learn." There needs to be dedicated attention to students' reflection on their work activities as close as possible to such activities as possible. It is unfortunately often too late to begin the process of reflection after the experience is over. Any learning cannot otherwise be tested against the real world of practice. The reflection should also be collective as well as concurrent. Participants can learn as much from sharing their incidents and stories with others as from their own introspection.

It is important that all parties to the learning - school, placement organization, and student - commit to the experiential form of education (Hollenbeck, 1997). For example, just providing courses within the workplace is not the same as learning from real work experience. Work-based learning does not subscribe to the perspective that knowledge is permanent and that it is acquired through protracted study or mental acquisition, and thus only through reason and intellect, not through emotion and reflection (Damasio, 1994; Letiche & Van Hattem, 2000; Styhre, 2003). Contextualized learning, it is asserted here, is just as viable a form of learning as classroom learning. Just appreciating this transformation in thought

as regards the basis of epistemology is as good a starting place as any in establishing the value of work-based learning (Raelin, 2007).

Standing in the U.S.

It may be puzzling to make a pronouncement about the purported value of practice in learning especially when it comes to preparation for knowledge work, such as the professions, which are embedded in practice itself? From a historical point of view, it appears, however, that U.S. state universities and colleges and second-tier private universities, in order to gain respectability, attempted to emulate their first-tier cousins. These latter institutions were still teaching using tried-and-true classroom methodologies that relied on cognitive development rather than field-learning approaches (Freeland, 2004). Furthermore, to sustain prestige, these same institutions would encourage their faculty members to continue to develop their research at the expense of more time-consuming teaching strategies that might afford greater intersection with the practice world that their students would someday face on their own. The scholarship chosen by the faculty would also rarely scrutinize their own practice; rather, it would be used to explore the content of their discipline (Braxton, 2005).

It is no wonder that critics in many of the professions have formed a chorus criticizing American universities for preparing students with the wrong competencies required to become successful in their fields (AAMC, 1998; MacCrate, 1992; Mintzberg, 2004). In particular, the critics have ultimately detected that our professional education has emphasized the technical skills over the interpersonal, the accumulation of facts over wisdom, and a focus on individual accomplishment over intersubjective appreciation. At the same time, it is not surprising that a hierarchical, decontextualized, and cognitive form of education would emerge in a provision that became detached from the world of practice. Even in contemporary liberal arts education, although there is interest in developing autonomous lifelong learners, only recently have curricular models begun to emphasize the value of real-world and interdisciplinary connections (Bastedo, 2002; Glynn, Aultman, & Owens, 2005).

U.S. higher education seems to be caught in a 19th-century rationalist web that portrays the vital knowledge to improve the world as being isolated within the minds of our brightest thinkers, who have

only to transmit this knowledge through written and verbal text. An alternative work-based learning epistemology has demonstrated that knowledge may be equally, if not even more effectively, acquired through reflective discourse within the very activity of practice. Aside from discourse's lens into social structure, we have the ability to use it as a means to expand knowledge for improved action in the world.

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