

Facilitating Work-Based Learning: A Handbook for Tutors

Edited by Ruth Helyer

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That there are so few books dedicated to teaching in higher education, raises the question why this very specific book on work-based learning (WBL). Should we “gloss over it” because we know how to teach, or because we are not engaged in WBL, or because we are already? What follows is a review biased towards using this title with the area of business education, rather than say nursing, social work, the creative arts or engineering. That said, without experiencing these fields, I find it likely that my review is relevant to these and other types of work. Most work places “suffer” from competing ways in which knowledge can be used in practice because of the complex practise involved. But then this complexity is what makes WBL challenging, exciting and worthwhile.

What type of educator might benefit most from using this edited work of Helyer of 13 chapters? In my view, both WBL and non-WBL tutors can find inspiration in this book in every chapter and in the order in which they are placed; starting with the Introduction (Helyer, 2016) that emphasises it is not the experience that matters but the learning, combined with Chapter 1’s point (Helyer and Garnett, 2016) that transdisciplinarity matters, which can take us to the use of threshold concepts (Land *et al.*, 2016).

Chapter 2 (Workman and Helyer, 2016) stresses that effective WBL starts with the tutor and so reinforces the need for the book. It might have considered taking a more critical look at the relationship between student, teacher and employer that WBL creates. What tensions might exist within this nexus and how might the tutor manage these?

Chapter 3 (Workman and Bravenboer, 2016) helps WBL tutors design programmes and curriculum that are distinct, acceptable and suitable. It talks of balancing traditional subject areas with real-world contexts. This theme progresses in the following Chapter 4 on negotiation and WBL (Laycock and Karpel, 2016) where the detail of partnering with a wider range of stakeholders is discussed, as is the related need to include different pedagogies such as heutagogy, experiential and reflective learning. Making sense of these pedagogies as a student is difficult, so tutors need pay attention to engaging students in these learning processes that make up an effective WBL, even within a well-designed programme. Recognising and accrediting prior experiential learning (Armsby and Helyer, 2016) is delved into greater detail in its own chapter, including useful misconceptions, showing how WBL tutors can learn from the experience of others in identifying these.

Tony Wall’s Chapter 6 “Turning practitioners into practitioner-researchers” sits regally on the top of the debates in this area of learning. What constitutes a research project is not agreed upon and can vary, sometimes rightly, sometimes questionably, within the same institution, in particular as regards to axiology (what is valued in research). A confused



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axiology amongst academics leads to confusion amongst students as to whom their research needs to convince and what “convince” might involve. Wall does not ignore the “different research worlds that exist” (p. 115). He quotes Hammersley (2012) regarding the lack of agreement as to what about social research methods should be taught to ensure students are neither philosophically oppressed nor obsessed. He proposes a practical axiology that values change and practical outcomes. Practitioner research “shifts from theory generation to making a change” (p. 117). What then becomes valued in practitioner research is not a reduction of the types of research a student might choose from as that would be defeatist. Instead the axiology becomes clear in a range of projects. Wall’s comprehensive approach to making practitioner-researchers avoids attempts to generate theory that are better left to PhDs. Returning to Helyer’s introductory point, it is the learning about how difficult it is to create knowledge that matters, not the production of perfect research.

Minton and Walsh’s Chapter 7 is full of interesting ideas such as using buddy systems that pair more experienced with less experienced students, how to help students develop more autonomy and creating students who are experts. All of which help to lower the operational complexity of effective and efficient WBL tutoring. At this point in the book, the reader has a sense of journey with Chapter 2 being delved into in by Minton and Walsh in more detail. Quality is not left untouched. Again, picking up on all previous chapters, Chapter 8 reminds us how to bring what is learnt from those chapters into a coherent approach to quality against that complex practice back-drop, whatever your chosen specific approach to WBL.

Less seemingly directly useful is Chapter 9 by Andy Price, because it addresses the use of social media to enhance WBL as it is a moving feast. The chapter does provide a way of remaining updated and sensibly suggests that students are asked what social media they use, how and why. He also highlights how social media creates an identity for both student and academic. It might have added that students frequently need to learn about critical digital literacy including how to select knowledge, how to discern how to use the text, how others might use it and how it was meant to be used. E-portfolio considerations are also missing.

From here on, I felt the journey I was being taken on was less clear but still valuable. Learning in the workplace globally, Chapter 10, has less clarity of purpose, not least as measured by how much scrawling of my own notes around it there are. More content on dealing with diversity in the workplace would have been useful. Importantly it does remind us to not impose a way of thinking on all global cultures, especially when giving feedback. Chapter 11, on learning to learn (Helyer and Price), covers reflection. It might have covered use of theory from different sources. It felt more simplistic than it might have been. I liked the inclusion of voluntary work and extra-curricular experiences as a source of learning and contrast. Billett, in the last chapter, makes the important point that learning needs to be made worthwhile and personalised, something our current “time jealous” students value (p. 260) and yet what we are asking them to do is not easy and it is so easy to be too critical of what they achieve, rather than giving students the confidence, using feed forward to gain more from their learning.

What is missing from this book? Following on from Wall’s chapter that talks of Levi-Strauss’ concept of bricoleur (1966), a chapter dedicated to how to use theory, and what theory can provide vs other forms of knowledge would allow WBL to lead relevant parts of higher education forward. Theory use is trickier in the real world than in a classroom. Whether we are too devoted to theory (vs say other forms of more immediate more accessible and so sometimes more practical in more basic situations) needs to be discussed. We need more facilitation of how to use theory and other sources of knowledge in the workplace and more sharing of how we scaffold student achievements to add more value to their endeavours.

Whether you are, or are not, a WBL specialist, you will find this book useful because it provokes you to question your teaching practice. Given that as faculty we are also time

jealous, if you are willing to spend your time reading this book, do practise what we WBL tutors preach and ensure that your reading turns into inquiry and then into action. Just as this is the test of WBL, it ought to be our test of how useful this book is to us.

Book review

Jill Shepherd

Department of Business Development, QA Apprenticeships, Slough, UK

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Further reading

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