

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 3

New Approaches to Work Experience

Context of the Research

The nature of work is changing due to the quickening pace of global scientific and technological innovation and the use of information and communication technologies. The scale and impact of global multinational activity and the process of industrial convergence have also exerted pressure for industrial, organisational and occupational change.

Distinctions between formal and informal contexts of learning are being challenged and innovative developments like “learning organisations” have emerged, all of which has an impact on the future role of work experience. Yet there is evidence that the true learning potential of work experience is not fully understood.

This research into the work experience for 16-19 year olds was conducted in six countries – Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It examined the purpose and assumptions about learning, and the practice and outcomes of work experience in the light of changes in the European labour market and trends in workplace requirements and organisation. An intensive exploration of learning theory has been undertaken and innovative approaches to work experience have been analysed through a number of case studies.

Key Conclusions

The following conclusions were reached: -

1. Five models of work experience were identified which reflect the different economic, technological and social factors prevailing within European countries as well as different ideas about learning and development. These different models can and do co-exist within the same country: -
 - a) Traditional - ‘launching’ students into the world of work.
 - b) Experiential - as ‘co-development’.
 - c) Generic - as an opportunity for key skill assessment.
 - d) Work process - a strategy to assist students in ‘attuning’ to the context of work.
 - e) Connective - a form of reflexive learning.

2. Overall, there is a poor relationship between policy and practice, a lack of clarity in relation to the aims and objectives of post-16 work experience, its delivery (in particular, a lack of clarity in relation to workplace supervision, mentoring and teaching, the availability and quality of placements), a lack of evidence in relation to learning, the role of employers (the quality of relationships between employers and education, the nature of qualifications sought, the degree of attention to changing nature and modes of work).
3. There is renewed emphasis upon learning in the workplace, which tends to be tackled in one of two main ways based upon the following limited assumptions: -
 - a) That the main purpose of work experience is to help young people to learn how to reproduce pre-existing activities, rather than to encourage them to learn and develop by 'putting things' into different contexts.
 - b) That learning in the workplace is best supported through involving young people in planning a work experience placement and managing and evaluating the learning through the use of statements about 'learning outcomes'.
4. However, the push to make work experience more widely available to young people has tended to address new issues about skill development by relying on old models of learning in the workplace.
5. Work experience should no longer be viewed as developing a technical competence in 'something' nor as providing an opportunity to use 'learning outcomes' as though they capture in some way the authentic knowledge/skill developed by a young person in a specific situation. Increasingly, work experience should be viewed as a means of developing an involved sense of responsibility.
6. The dominant interpretation of 'transfer', which stresses 'the degree to which a behaviour will be repeated in a new situation', is insufficient. The concept of consequential transitions is necessary, which recognises an extra dynamic in the process of exploring new territory in which pre-learned responses and solutions are unavailable. Such transitions may involve changes in identity as well as changes in knowledge and skill thus involving the full person and not just learned attributes or techniques.
7. Increasingly, workers are expected to act as 'boundary crossers' between "activity systems" - to possess the ability to contribute to the development of new forms of social practice and to produce new forms of knowledge. This entails learning how to contribute to the transformation of work contexts.
8. Therefore, the innovative 'connective' model of pedagogy and learning in work-based contexts should be developed.

9. Work should not be solely a context which students learn *about*; it is a context *through which* students can learn and develop. This shift of focus can direct attention to how individuals learn, grow and develop through the strength and richness of their interactions and applications within and between different contexts.
10. As a result of these conclusions there is a need to re-think the function of work experience in post-16, as well as in higher, education.

Key Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations: -

1. The current policies on work experience should be informed by what is known about *learning* as well as what is known about changes in work.
2. Businesses, educational and vocational institutions should practically respond by using and developing the “connective” model of learning through work experience. It offers ways of: -
 - a) Connecting formal and informal contexts of learning - relevant in course development.
 - b) ‘Mediation’ between formal and informal contexts of learning that are fundamental in achieving an effective relationship between classroom learning and workplace learning and can be developed by teachers and workplace educators/trainers in partnership.
 - c) Considering quality through the identification, development and transfer of learning that goes well beyond the ‘checklist’ approach to quality issues. The framework should be developed in the school/workplace context and in the context of the connective model.
3. Change in educational institutions and in businesses in relation to education-business partnership innovation should also take account of such innovation – often involving applications of the learning technologies at the ‘periphery’ –in the knowledge that ‘innovation without change’ is ubiquitous.

Further Information

Full title of study - “Work Experience as an Education and Training Strategy New Approaches for the 21st Century” (February 2001). The research project was funded under the EU Fourth Framework (Targeted Socio-Economic Research).

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

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