



Volume 6

Debating the first principles of English vocational education

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Introduction

Over the past six years, Edge has hosted regular debates on the principles and philosophy underpinning Vocational Education and Training (VET) in England.

High quality vocational education is a key element of equipping young people with the skills they need and making education relevant. But at present the vision is fractured. Due to rapid policy change and deeply ingrained cultural views, there is not yet a consensus about the role and place of VET in our broader education system, and in society at large.

That is why these debates are so important. They bring together leading academics, researchers, employers, trade unions, and international experts to discuss some of the key questions that underpin high quality VET. While these began as a way of driving academic thinking, the debate has become increasingly influential in policymaking and practice circles.

Continuing our longstanding partnership with Professor Chris Winch (King's College London), Edge hosted a sixth debate on the philosophy of vocational education in February 2024, kindly hosted by Birmingham Metropolitan College at their Matthew Boulton campus.

Following these timely discussions, this report seeks to bring together insights drawn from the debates, as well as more detailed reflections from colleagues working across the VET research and policy landscape in England and internationally.

In this edition, we sought from contributors 'provocations' in response to three primary questions discussed at our debates:

- What counts as a workplace and how to learners fit into it?
- What should non-formal learning in the workplace look like?
- How should we best connection informal workplace learning and formal training?

The Sixth Debate on the Principles of English Vocational Education



Professor Chris Winch
Kings College London

This is the sixth debate in our ongoing series on the Principles of English Vocational Education. It focused on three interrelated issues:

- What exactly is the workplace?
- Exploring the tensions between learning and earning. What should non-formal and informal learning in the workplace look like?
- How should we best connect informal and non formal learning in the workplace with formal VET outside the workplace?

What exactly is the workplace?

All participants recognised the diversity of workplaces and the fact that different kinds of workplaces put different demands on learners. Current trends such as more working from home were also noted. A number of issues and challenges arose from the discussion

about the nature of the workplace. One particular issue concerned the scope for error in the workplace, given that learning through making mistakes is an important part of VET. Some workplaces can afford to be more tolerant than others about this. Others, particularly those that are safety critical, cannot permit the making of mistakes in the workplace and off the job learning has to be a necessary preliminary to learners being allowed into the workplace. The question arose as to where and when it is possible to capitalise on learning through making mistakes, given that this could be a powerful learning tool. More generally, it was suggested that all kinds of incidents that fall short of errors which have learning potential may occur in the workplace and the ability to reflect on and profit from these, either individually or with the aid of a more experienced colleague is important. It was also noted that the workplace is both a powerful means of socialisation and maturation and a way of developing agency and exercising autonomy. It is thus potentially a powerful means of personal as well as instrumental development. Concern was expressed about the trend towards homeworking and the dangers for learner/workers arising from excessive confinement to homeworking environments. It was broadly agreed that this was a challenge that needs to be confronted if the role of the workplace as a site of learning is not to be compromised.





Exploring the tensions between learning and earning: what should non-formal and informal learning in the workplace look like?

While it was acknowledged that there is a tension between learning and earning in the workplace, a number of participants argued that this tension is not necessarily negative. A large amount of goodwill towards learners exists in many enterprises and this should be recognised and built on by learners, colleges and training providers. The ability to exercise agency and to develop autonomy is valued by employers and enlightened ones encourage learners to grow in autonomy in the workplace. There should be informal opportunities for reflection on authentic experience and thus the engagement with authentic experience and responsibility for aspects of work operations should be planned and provided for in order to include maximum benefit for the learner and also in a more self-interested sense for the employer to develop a sense of loyalty and commitment to the enterprise on the part of valuable future employees. As already noted informal learning is important and should be encouraged by senior staff working with learners. Some of the more negative aspects of 'earning and learning' were also pointed out. There is the danger of 'bad learning' through the inculcation of bad practices and unfounded prejudices. There is also the danger of inauthentic workplace experience, either through confinement to non-autonomous or trivial tasks or through failure to plan for learning within the context of work tasks. The development of workplaces as sites of learning remains a work in progress.

How should we best connect informal and non-formal learning in the workplace with formal VET outside the workplace?

One of the challenges of making workplace learning effective is that of securing the support that learners need in order to make the most of their opportunities. A pedagogic role for some senior and experienced staff was thought to be important. This could range from formal mentoring through to informal and reflective conversations, which bring 'hidden' learning to reflective awareness which further develops workplace agency. Such a role requires both time and preparation for experienced employees to develop such ability and the availability of workplace pedagogues is sometimes problematic, not just in England but also in countries that pride themselves on their workplace learning, such as Germany. A particular challenge that no country can claim to have fully mastered is that of effectively linking formal learning in the classroom, laboratory, workshop and simulatory environments with extending and deepening practice in the workplace. Very often links between colleges, training providers and workplace practitioners, including those with a pedagogic role, are not optimal and it was generally agreed that this is an area which most countries that value workplace learning need to do further work on.

Debate 1: What counts as a workplace and how do learners fit into it?

The workplace is the site of work, but it can be anywhere: not just in an office or factory floor, but also for example in operating theatres, boats, planes and forests. Ultimately vocational education prepares learners to operate successfully in the workplace, but they cannot do so immediately. The workplace involves pressures and responsibilities: time, safety, the needs of colleagues and clients and also provides little opportunity to correct mistakes. Classrooms and simulatory environments do not share these features. Our first debate looked at the challenges and complexities involved in learning in the workplace.

In our first provocation, Prue Huddleston (Warwick), provided an expansive definition: that workplaces are critical learning environments offering both formal and informal learning opportunities through the nature of work and social interactions. These environments vary greatly in terms of sector, size, location, and permanence. Learners in workplaces include new and existing employees and those in transitional roles, acquiring not just job-specific skills but also the socio-cultural aspects of their professions. Effective workplace learning involves progressive skill development, authentic tasks, and reflective practices. The aim of vocational education is, therefore, to bridge education and employment, fostering employability and professional identity through tailored pedagogies and partnerships among educators, employers, and communities.

Following Prue, Isabelle Huning (York) explored how the workplace serves as a diverse entry points for vocational learning in various permutations, including apprenticeship, internships, and placements. There, quality of learning depends on how workplaces perceive their role in the learning process, and whether they prioritise immediate firm needs or broader professional development. Effective vocational learning environments prepare learners for industry-wide employability and adaptability, fostering continuous learning and preventing precarious employment. As Isabelle explored, workplace practices can impact learners' experiences and outcomes, emphasizing the need for workplaces to support comprehensive vocational training and integration into the professional community.

In the group discussion that followed, participants in our debates took up a number of themes. Firstly, discussants emphasised that in order to best harness the workplace as a learning opportunity, fostering a culture that values learning across employers from SMEs and large employers is crucial. We heard numerous stories and examples of how faced with immediate and existential operational concerns, long term personal development that are in employers' best interest can become far from a primary priority. Employer concerns were especially acute around 'poaching' trained staff whereby employers who invest in training lose the benefit of their investment. SMEs face particular challenges due to limited resources, whereas larger employers can offer more consistent learning opportunities. Discussants



emphasised the importance social contacts and of the collective value of a highly-trained labour pool to elevate the importance of education in the workplace. Employers often feel undervalued, and shifting policy priorities, especially around curriculum reform, can discourage their involvement.

Securing opportunities for learning in the workplace presents significant challenges, with colleges struggling to find sufficient opportunities. A lack of a standard interface between employers and partners leads to variable engagement quality. Students' personal connections play a critical role in locating placements, leading to inequalities, particularly for example in T level placements. The concept of placements varies widely by sector, necessitating tailored approaches. For instance, traditional placements may not be suitable for digital industries where working from home is common, raising safeguarding concerns. Innovative solutions are needed to ensure equitable and meaningful placements for all students.

One way in which the immediate returns to workplace learning might be emphasised involves inverting the traditional training model. In some sectors, such

as electric vehicles, college curricula may be more advanced than standard workplace practices. Students can disseminate advanced knowledge back to their workplaces, acting as catalysts for innovation. However, SMEs and aging workforces may struggle with reskilling due to a lack of confidence and understanding of the benefits of investing in new training.

Finally, discussion anticipated our discussion in the second and third debates around non-formal education. Discussants identified the central place of informal learning in the workplace. However, learners and employers may not always recognise or value this learning. At this early stage, discussants identified the importance of enabling learners to develop the ability to reflect and recognise

Reflective practices are essential for identifying learning opportunities, particularly in complex situations. Mistakes and high-risk situations can serve as significant learning experiences if managed properly. Developing the ability to reflect and recognise learning moments is vital for sensitizing young people to available learning opportunities.



What counts as a workplace and how do learners fit into it?

Prue Huddleston, University of Warwick



'The workplace is enormously significant as a site of learning, both for accessing formal learning opportunities and for many informal learning opportunities which result from the nature of work and from social interaction with work groups.' (Rainbird, 2000:1)

Workplaces are highly diverse in terms of sector, size, product market, ownership. They are also diverse in location, for example, laboratories, studios, building sites, and increasingly the kitchen worktop or spare bedroom. They may be permanent, temporary, precarious.

Who are the learners?

Workplaces are sites of learning, for new and existing workers and those just passing through, not just in terms of the knowledge and skills required to perform the job, but also the socio-cultural aspects of the trade or profession. Shullman (2005) describes these as *signature pedagogies* 'three fundamental dimensions of professional work – *to think, to perform, and to act with integrity*' (ibid:52). This involves endowing learners



not just with knowledge, skills, and attitudes but also the values and identity of a profession. These may differ according to context.

Fettes et al (2020) remind us: putting skills to work is not a one-off event, but 'a continuous, contextually embedded, transformative process' (184). It requires progressive development of learner capabilities supported by partnerships within communities of practice. It presupposes the involvement of the learner in authentic work tasks, the adoption of habits of reflection and inquiry, being mindful of the contribution of co-workers as sources of information and advice, recognising how and where skills have been developed and deployed. (ibid.) The same applies to existing staff.

Vocational education as the "cure-all"

For over a hundred years developing closer links between education and employment has been promoted as an alleged panacea for a range of economic, social, demographic, and technological challenges faced by society at large, not just by employers (Huddleston and Unwin, 2024; Huddleston, 2021).

As Kersch et al. (2021) suggest developing employability skills as well as enhancing young people's human and social capital have become significant social inclusion goals in workplace learning.

Given the multiplicity of aims and contexts, how do we configure learning programmes to meet such diversity of learners?

Vocational pedagogies and benefits for learners

Vocational pedagogy is understood as the sum of the many decisions which vocational teachers and trainers take as they teach, adjusting their approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners and the contexts

in which they occur. 'Specific features of vocational pedagogy, such as authenticity, vocational identity and the reconciliation of theory and practice are of critical importance in the successful delivery of VET curricula' (Cedefop, 2015, 8), but they can and should be more than that.

It requires a shared understanding of what counts as workplace learning from all stakeholders and a shared responsibility for providing and supporting high quality vocational education and training, making connections, and crossing boundaries (Akkerman and Bakker, 2012). Where there is no clear vision about what is being aimed for and where pedagogy is not clearly identified or understood, much is left to chance. 'Pedagogies that bridge theory and practice are never simple' (Shullman, 2005, 56).

Challenges

In addition to such challenges, other challenges may remain. Where the partnership between educators and social partners is not well developed, it is difficult to organise hybrid, connected and alternating environments. Trainers, both in schools and enterprises, may be reluctant, or lack confidence, to update teaching and learning particularly in the creative use of learning environments.

Short-term policy approaches and unsustainable, piecemeal change inhibits long-term investment and commitment in learning environments. National prescriptions do not always match local needs, capability, or capacity.

What do we want young people to achieve from participating in and learning from workplaces?

Attempts to link education with life beyond the academy are longstanding. With increasingly unstable and precarious labour markets, young people though better educated and more highly qualified than ever are struggling to find their way as aspiring craftspeople, technicians, professionals, and citizens. Supply side interventions, for example qualification reform, mandated work experience, careers education, have not silenced the cries for education and employers to engage more with each other, nor lessened employers' criticisms of those leaving education.

However, this is a 'two-way street' and interventions on the supply side should be matched with a corresponding response on the demand side. Employers are members of the education community, rather than recipients of education's outputs. Employers can demonstrate that their workplaces provide opportunities in which both new entrants and existing staff can learn and develop, and that they afford interesting and stimulating work environments.

We want young people to achieve from active participation in workplace learning not just to "know that" but "to know how," "where," and "how to become." (Huddleston, 2011). Where young people are guided through their learning and can reflect and build on workplace experiences, they can develop autonomy, expertise, and a sense of professional identity.

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What constitutes a workplace and what are the conditions to make it the entry point to an interconnected community of learning and practice?



Isabelle Huning, University of York

In the current landscape of vocational education and training (VET), the formal frameworks involving a workplace are diverse. Learners can enter the workplace as apprentices with a contract in place, as interns, trainees, or through a placement. With the variety of on-the-job training arrangements comes variation in the time learners stay at their workplace, the complexity of the tasks they are given, and consequently the learning outcome. It would be an oversimplification to argue that complexity alone dictates the quality of the workplace. To develop this point, it is helpful to have named, invented, but representative examples of learners as illustrations. Some interns, for example Anna, learn and thrive, even if the experience only lasts a few weeks. They gain insight into firm structures, are given their own tasks, and take over responsibility. They are allowed to practise and gain an understanding of what the job they are looking into entails. Their decision for or against the vocation is based on experience and information. Other examples of apprentices, such as Tom, who are employed in the workplace, paid and are supposed to learn the ropes of the trade report the opposite. Some learn little, are bound to initially assigned tasks and shadowing others, with marginal progression over time.

These two opposite experiences illustrate that the quality of the workplace is not constituted by formal arrangement but rather its purpose. What qualifies workplaces as part of the vocational learning community is how they understand their role in the learning process. Do they see their own immediate needs, satisfy a firm-specific short-time demand in oftentimes unskilled labour, or are they regarded within a bigger picture of motivating a candidate to enter a continuous learning

experience in this trade, which makes them employable by a wide range of firms, and allows them to become "full participants in the community of practice" (Fuller and Unwin 2003, 49)?

In a training landscape orientated to employers' and firms' needs, the workplace is often a location where jobs that are due immediately need to be completed. The learner fits into it by fulfilling their tasks, trying to keep errors to a minimum. Consequently, the learner advances their skills through 'learning by doing' (Cedefop 2017) what they are assigned to do. Tom's experience demonstrates how this perception of the workplace too often leaves little room for their needs as a learner to prepare for a vocational life.

It questions where the workplace ends and where precarious employment begins. In a workplace where learning is considered a side effect of executing tasks to meet current needs of a specific firm, trainees eventually slide into a position with little transferable skills usable to seek employment elsewhere, or even at the same employer when technology or circumstances change, and trainees have never learnt how to adapt to this. A workplace that serves the needs of employers across the industry and seeks to prepare the learners for a life in the profession can help to bridge the gap between a literal understanding of one specific physical location within a set timeframe and professional training that views the workplace as a more abstract concept, as a multitude of employment situations in different firms, across different tasks, and adaptable to technical or circumstantial change.



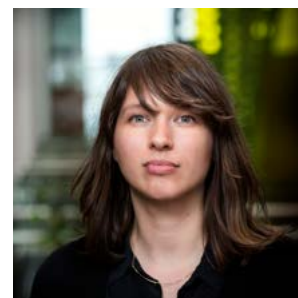
This is again reflected in the examples of Tom and Anna. The case of Anna illustrates the workplace as constituting elements of a model of learning (Fuller and Unwin 2011) in preparation for a wider professional community independent of the length and complexity of the formal framework. We can imagine that Anna connects unique experiences in one firm with the wider principles, structures, and values of the occupation. This helps them to gain confidence in their vocational choice and contextualise the tasks they were given. Is a workplace one physical location that serves the myopic needs of a specific firm, or an abstract idea of a place in which people can apply and extend their skills, and as consequences of this avoid precarious employment and redundancy through technical change they were not prepared for?

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Work-based learning in Iceland: Current status and some issues

Elsa Eiríksdóttir, associate professor School of Education, University of Iceland



Too often in policy discussion and in practice, it can be easy to take concepts that are familiar to all participants for granted and that may need to be unpacked. To provide an international perspective and disrupt our familiarity with VET, Elsa Eiríksdóttir spoke on Icelandic vocational education.

Vocational education in Iceland is offered at the upper secondary education level (EQF level 4) and generally includes work-based learning (WBL). Over the last two decades, education policy in Europe has increasingly emphasised the importance of work-based learning as an integral component of vocational education, and Iceland is no exception.

There is a general agreement among those working within the Icelandic vocational education and training (VET) system that workplaces provide an important venue for learning. The reasons are that the workplace can offer varied training situations, tasks, and projects for students. The students gain experience working in the field, can better understand procedures and methods used in practice, and have the chance for varied skill development. Workplaces also provide a place for legitimate participation and the formation of vocational identity, as students start to understand what working in the field entails. Prior research has shown that students, teachers in vocational schools, as well as workplace trainers all agree that some things are best taught at the workplace, for example, working under pressure, customer service, and independence. However, WBL has also been criticised, mainly for problems in guaranteeing quality, the lack of coherence and collaboration with school, and often too little time given for teaching and learning. Also, the education of the students has often been too dependent on the particular workplace they contract with.

Work-based learning can take different forms, but the two most common forms in Iceland are: (1) WBL organised by the school – usually of a short duration (a few days to

3 weeks), unpaid, and a part of the coursework (students receive credits). (2) WBL as apprenticeship – usually of longer duration and paid as the student has a contractual relationship with the employer. The largest section of the vocational system in Iceland are the certified trades (for example, carpenters, hairdressers, and electricians), where a journeyman's certificate is required by legislation to work the field. In these fields, apprenticeship has been the norm as a defined part of the curricula. Before 2021 the duration of apprenticeships in these fields was set in the number of weeks spent at the workplace (ranging from 24 to 126 weeks in total) and the rest of the programme was completed at school (for a total of 4 years on average). The system was also characterised by a clear separation of the two sites of learning and students were de facto responsible for finding an apprenticeship contract and bridging the gap between the school and the workplace. In 2021 a new regulation was introduced with three major changes to the system: (1) Schools were formally made responsible for the vocational students throughout the program as a whole, including the WBL, and for finding them apprenticeship contracts. (2) An unpaid school-led pathway was introduced as an alternative or an exception for students to finish their studies if apprenticeship contracts were not available. (3) Duration of WBL was defined through competency development (laid out in an electronic logbook) and the previously set number of weeks designated as the maximum duration.

These changes were intended to address some of the criticism of WBL, and to a degree they have, but they have also created some new ones. Discussions about the changes reveal some of the central issues seen in systems including WBL as a part of the vocational curriculum, not confined to Iceland.

Duration vs. competencies

The first issue revolves around duration vs. competencies and how extensive training needs to be in WBL. Research has revealed tensions between

pedagogical and economic goals in WBL. In Iceland, shorter periods at the end of the programme when the students are more work-ready can be seen in fields where training beginners is costly to the workplace (in terms of time or revenue), while longer periods are seen in fields where the student can add value to work-place regardless of their skill. The recent regulation changes increased the dilemma by introducing competency-based apprenticeships. First, because this requires agreeing on the level of proficiency required, which can be difficult. Especially as competency descriptions often do not clearly specify the skill level required. Secondly, workplaces have participated in the training system in part based on the unstated assumption that training an apprentice provides value, especially at the end of the training period when students have become more proficient and independent. Concluding the contract with the student earlier can therefore discourage workplaces to participate in the VET system.

Content and quality

The second issue concerns the **content and quality of workplace learning**. In WBL, and in apprenticeships in particular, students are both workers and learners and these roles need to be balanced. Criticism on WBL has often revolved around the lack of learning opportunities, with students being used for monotonous and simplistic tasks and not learning anything. But tensions also exist around what should be learned during WBL, that is, whether the students are learning anything worthwhile. This issue therefore revolves around the workplace curriculum. Introducing the electronic logbook, which is based upon occupational standards, has been an improvement as it lays out the competencies that should be acquired during WBL. However, some have found it is too restricting and lacking flexibility for specialization and unusual placements (for example abroad). There has also been discussion on whether students need to complete all competency components and how and when it should be updated and by whom. The logbook is therefore an important addition to the system, but it has revealed tensions concerning what should be taught at the workplace and who determines the workplace curriculum.

Placement and communications

The third issue concerns **placement and communications** and revolves around the relationship between the school and the workplace. Prior to the regulation changes in 2021 the school and the workplace were two independent venues of learning, and the student

was responsible for finding placements, connecting what was learned at each site, and moving between them. Making the school responsible for the student throughout the programme has been a clear improvement as the students have help in securing WBL contracts and some recourse if they encounter any problems. However, this has changed the power balance in the system, and it is not clear whether the role of the school is monitoring WBL and if it extends to disqualifying workplaces from taking on students. Introducing an unpaid school led WBL, has also muddied the water as some workplaces prefer to participate in the system if they do not have to pay the students and there are debates about what exactly does trigger this exemption. Therefore, as a whole the change benefitted students but has also created some problems, especially as the changes did not include any guidelines on roles and avenues for communications between the schools and the workplaces.

To conclude, the regulation changes from 2021 concerning WBL did have important benefits and addressed critical problems in the Icelandic VET system. However, they also revealed tensions and created some new issues. This discussion shows the importance of trust in the VET system and communications between the two sites of learning. But it also shows the importance of oversight, as it is necessary for the ensuring quality of training and providing a recourse for students. Balancing trust and oversight can be difficult and is currently the main challenge facing the Icelandic VET system when it comes to WBL.

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Debate 2: Exploring the tensions between learning and earning – what should non-formal learning in the workplace look like?

Apprentices and other learners who are employees have a dual role. On the one hand they contribute to the prosperity of their enterprise, on the other they are learning to take part in an occupation and to be a successful worker in that enterprise. How can learning be managed so that the learner increases their competence, both in their enterprise and their occupation? How can the enterprise's commercial or budgetary mission accommodate the needs of the learner? Our second debate looked at the challenges involved in this dual role from the perspective of both employers and employees. It viewed questions ideas through the lens of the problem of how to facilitate excellence in non-formal learning despite all the pressures and responsibilities in the workplace.

Kevin Orr in his contribution defines non-formal learning in the workplace as learning which is 'not at that moment formally assessed for certification'. This learning is an important aspect of workplace learning and is therefore, Kevin argues, subject to the same expectations of workplace learning mode widely: it needs to be part of an authentic work experience, developing the capacity to act with the best knowledge, and integrating trainees into occupational communities. Even in non-formal learning, there needs to be some of curation of learning by experienced staff to balance the primary goals of the workplace with the educational needs of trainees. The risks of unstructured learning include the adoption of poor practices. Therein lies one important role for combining workplace experiences with classroom learning to ensure comprehensive professional development. Non-formal learning in the workplace therefore needs to be intentional, guided, and integrated with formal education to maximise its benefits.

In the debate's second provocation, Roy Priest describes an example of non-formal learning in the workplace: the Industrial Mentors (IMs) initiative at Birmingham City University as a model for effective non-formal learning

in the workplace. The IM initiative is presented as a case study reflecting on the establishment of a successful framework for engagement between a higher education institution and a range of businesses. This initiative connects students with industry professionals through forums, allowing them to gain insights into the practical application of their academic knowledge. The IMs forums facilitate informal, ongoing engagement that helps students develop technical skills, understand industry expectations, and expand their professional networks. Employers also benefit from access to a diverse talent pool and opportunities for recruitment and collaboration.





Our discussion returned to many broader points from the first debate. Respectful partnerships between employers and educational institutions are essential for aligning employers' immediate operational needs with their values and long-term goals including employee learning. This alignment is particularly complex due to the variability in cultures across different employers and sectors. For instance, the NHS has a unique social responsibility that necessitates a degree of coherence in the field, balancing immediate corporate responsibilities with long-term sustainability, including investment in education. Resource constraints, especially in SMEs, can hinder their capacity to prioritise sustainability, often leading to unrealistic expectations of students' capabilities during stressful periods.

Again, anticipating the next debate, the role of mentoring in work-based learning was a significant point of discussion. There was a consensus on the need for initiatives to equip mentors and coaches, yet uncertainty remained about what constitutes good practice in this area. The absence of a standardised

framework for work-based learning and mentoring poses a challenge. Discussions revolved around the potential for establishing a social contract through cultural change or legislation, considering a spectrum from interventionist frameworks to co-created, voluntary agreements. SMEs face particular difficulties in providing effective apprenticeships due to their limited structural capacity, a problem that could be mitigated by a social contract approach.

Supporting Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) learners in workplace placements remains a critical concern. Public sector organizations, like the NHS and local authorities, are more likely to offer placements to SEND learners, possibly due to greater accountability and preparedness. The discussion called for an exploration of why these organizations are more supportive and how the private sector could be encouraged to follow suit. The overarching goal is to ensure that SEND learners receive meaningful and aspirational opportunities.

Exploring the tensions between learning and earning – what should non-formal learning in the workplace look like?



Professor Kevin Orr, Visiting Professor at the University of Huddersfield

Workplace learning while on placement within technical and vocational courses is very well-established, and apprenticeships are predicated on learning in the workplace. But, what might reasonably be expected from work-based learning? What are the opportunities and the risks associated with learning in the workplace?

The term non-formal, like informal learning has been criticised for denigrating workplace learning in comparison to classroom learning. That is certainly not my intention. All learning, especially in the workplace, includes elements which may be considered to be formal and informal (see Colley, Hodgkinson and Malcolm 2003). Here my focus is on learning associated with incidentally occurring procedures or practices in the workplace; learning which is not at that moment formally assessed for certification.

So, what is expected of workplace learning? Here are three main aims.

1. Access for trainees or students to authentic experiences.
2. To develop a capacity for action in the workplace, which Guile and Unwin (2022) describe as the "capacity to act with the best or right knowledge".
3. To become part of an occupational community.

Certainly, workplaces provide authentic opportunities to learn about work but that learning involves overcoming an inherent tension. The primary purpose of a workplace is not the learning of employees or those on placements. The primary purpose is childcare, film production, transport, manufacturing or whatever the organisation does. There can be a tension, therefore,

between opportunities for learning and the primary purpose of the organisation.

Curation of learning in the workplace is necessary in order to best navigate the conflicting needs of the organisation or enterprise. The criteria for that curation will depend on the specific circumstances. In the case of healthcare, it may be about protecting the patient; in the case of companies producing a profit, it may be about weighing up time and resources. In any case this entails an established member of staff taking responsibility in a purposeful way for the learning of a junior member of staff or placement student, all the time remembering what the workplace is there to do primarily. Stephen Billett (2002, p32, my emphasis) has described this as "direct interpersonal guidance in assisting less experienced workers to access and develop capacities that they would not discover alone." Workplace learning may be associated with incidental opportunities, but the learning should not be accidental.

Work-based learning may need curating by an appropriate person for other reasons, too. An important factor in work-based learning is authenticity, but what if that authenticity includes shoddy practice, contempt for clients, not wearing PPE, prejudices towards minorities or women? Learning in those circumstances can mean adaptation to or acceptance of dysfunction. Learning is taking place, but is it the kind of learning we might want?

Even beyond such professional or ethical considerations, if we only learn what we experience, then our learning is limited. Experiential learning is only as broad as our experience.



So, in all circumstances of workplace learning having access to concepts or alternative practices, usually through classroom based delivery, is important. This is the necessary and often productive tension between the classroom and workplace learning. It is not the role of the college or classroom to mimic what happens in the workplace. It is the role of the college or classroom to analyse, to challenge, to augment, to recontextualise, what happens in the workplace.

That requires an active relationship between the classroom and the workplace so that each knows what is going on in the other place.

That brings us back to the need for someone in the workplace to be aware of what the trainees/ students/apprentices need to learn, who will liaise with someone in the college who is similarly aware of what is happening in the workplace. That person in the workplace and in the college needs to have the knowledge, the wherewithal and the authority to make appropriate decisions regarding learning, and to act upon them.

So, in summary, work-based learning is valuable, but it needs to be purposefully directed by someone who

understands the workplace and the learning of the trainee or apprentice, and has the responsibility and capacity to navigate that situation.

Finally, another type of learning can happen in the workplace. That is, established employees can learn from the trainee, apprentice or placement student who can introduce new techniques, fresh approaches, or how things are done elsewhere.

For that to happen, the trainee apprentice or placement student needs to be valued, of course.

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Working with employers to maximise the potential for non-formal learning

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'In the context of increased resource pressures on both businesses and universities, universities may wish to consider what more they can do to engage with businesses. This will likely require proactive engagement, [...] presenting themselves in a way that is accessible to those in the private sector while recognizing that not all activity will and should be undertaken with a commercial goal in mind' (NCUB, 2022).

Birmingham City University (BCU) is a large, modern university with 30,000 students from 100 countries. As a widening participation institution, the student body is diverse and many students come from underprivileged backgrounds. Established in 2004, the Industrial Mentors (IMs) initiative was designed as a platform to facilitate ongoing, informal engagement between academics, students and industry partners.



As course leader for two BSc audio-related programmes, I perceived the untapped potential for closer engagement to support non-formal learning between the University and individual companies. There are various reasons why companies might want to engage with higher education (Este and Patel, 2007); mentorship and external engagement aligns to corporate social responsibility and opportunities to participate are often welcomed on this basis. It was apparent that alumni in particular, wanted to give back; this was manifest in a diverse range of guest lectures, masterclasses and workshops.

Facilitated via the University's virtual learning environment, the IMs forums were established to give students across all years the opportunity to engage in informal dialogue with a range of industry-based professionals, drawn from SMEs to multinationals. Embedded as a supplementary part of course delivery, the forums are supported by ~40 industry mentors representing the spectrum of potential course-related graduate destinations. Ease of access to external mentors can present transformational opportunities, addressing some of the key barriers to successful graduate employment for our students. The platform facilitates enhanced engagement through direct access to global professional role models, allowing students the opportunity to explore the industrial context of their developing academic knowledge. Login access and the visibility of identities ensures that this is a safe environment in which students can explore professional practice and develop their critical analysis and communication skills. The insights being shared are beneficial to all students, including those that may be reticent to post. Access to professional networks are particularly beneficial to those students who may lack social capital. Approximately half of the mentors are alumni and as such offer relatable, recognisable role models to current students.



The benefits to employers of such direct access to the University environment includes opportunities for recruitment, both in terms of graduate posts and year-long placements. The asynchronous nature of forum-based interaction offers convenience to industry partners. As a platform for ongoing engagement, the IMs forums act as a foundation upon which a range of further opportunities for interaction can be developed, such as live projects and joint research. Employers have also welcomed the opportunity to gain insight from students as they represent a hard-to-access diverse demographic, both as potential recruits and as customers.

The forums have offered opportunities for a range of non-formal, student-led learning. Discussions have focused on the development of particular technical skills. Students have used the forums to explore parallels between what they are being taught on the course and how this is reflected in the commercial world. Feedback has also included careers guidance and advice on project work.

The IMs initiative reflects the demand from employers to build relationships with key institutions and see a return on their investment (Shadbolt, 2016). In the context of the IMs forums, this could involve the satisfaction of inspiring young people, sharing skills and experience, offering placements, graduate positions and research collaboration. Underpinning the IMs approach is the emphasis on the experience of interaction being enjoyable for all participants. BCU's annual Innovation Fest offers an opportunity for face-to-face interaction, allowing IMs the opportunity to interact with peers from other organisations, academics and students.

The IMs initiative is part of a suite of opportunities for engagement including College and Course level Industrial Advisory Boards. This approach allows employers choice in terms of the type of involvement and time that they are prepared to commit. Module level Industrial Consultants act as critical friends influencing curriculum content, approaches to delivery and assessment design. Such approaches have led to external partner involvement in formative and summative feedback. The Industrial Mentors initiative has demonstrated that employers want to engage with educational institutions if they feel that their involvement is worthwhile and that there is respect for the time that they are prepared to commit.

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Debate 3: How should we best connection non-formal workplace learning and formal training?

Workplace learners learn in different ways. Sometimes they learn incidentally in the workplace either through advice or reflection on incidents. On other occasions they rely on experienced workers who also have pedagogic abilities to enable them to make the most of the more structured learning situations that they encounter. How well prepared are mentors, trainers and experienced workers for this role and how do they ensure a productive relationship with the more formal aspects of learning in the classroom? This debate looks at the challenges and needs of workers who are also teachers.

Ann-Marie Bathmaker in her review of the literature in this space highlights four challenges for connecting non-formal and formal learning. Firstly, cultures of workplaces can vary substantially and inform how far they are conducive to learning opportunities. Secondly, she highlights the importance of 'a relationship of social exchange and trust between different partners involved'. Thirdly, personnel are instrumental in enabling and supporting work-based learning, and their capacities are not automatically assured. Fourth, learners are themselves responsible for integrating theory and practice.

Taking forwards Ann-Marie's outline, our discussion agreed that integrating formal and non-formal workplace learning requires cultivating cultures of learning, effective mentorship, and clear learning development and progression strategies. Participants highlighted the importance of mentors and other critical individuals who often exceed their formal roles by providing specialist knowledge and prompting reflection among learners. Effective mentoring is not just about transferring knowledge but also about fostering a supportive environment that encourages young people to thrive rather than merely cope. This recognition underscores the need for structured mentoring programs, which should be acknowledged as a form of staff development. Employers need to allocate dedicated time for these activities, similar to practices in careers like teacher training, where mentoring is integrated into the job.



The variability across sectors and the non-equitability of pedagogic versus sector language present challenges to such interventions, however. There is no one-size-fits-all mentoring approach, as different industries have unique needs and expectations. Degree apprenticeships are a notable example, where programmes need adaptation to meet the specific requirements of apprentices and employers. This flexibility ensures that the learning experience is authentic and beneficial for all stakeholders involved.

Discussion also emphasised, as it was throughout the debates, the importance of even everyday interactions as learning opportunities. Interactions during coffee breaks and lunchtimes play a significant role in workplace learning. As part of the mentoring process, these moments should be recognised and planned for, as they contribute to a supportive learning environment. However, modern productivity initiatives can limit these informal interactions, which are vital for young workers who may not yet be full-time employees. Employers should create spaces that facilitate these informal learning moments to enhance overall workplace learning.

Finally, the concept of 'work readiness' was scrutinised, with some employers expressing a preference for young workers who bring fresh ideas, energy, and innovation. This approach requires employers to possess coaching skills and young workers to have the confidence to express their ideas. Discussion concluded with a call for workplace learning to shift from merely preparing young workers to fit into existing frameworks to developing their unique contributions to the workplace.



Cultures, commitment, competence and recontextualization:

Four challenges for constructive relations between workplace learning and formal education and training



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There is a plethora of research into what makes for productive connections between workplace learning and formal education and training (see for example Bahl and Dietzen 2019; Malloch et al 2011; Mulder 2017). Yet experience in settings across the globe shows that supporting learning in, through and for the workplace is a 'wicked problem', where solutions are always and only ever work in progress (ILO 2017; McGrath et al 2019; Tikkanen et al 2018; Wheelahan et al 2015).

In what follows I highlight four issues that research and practice show to be enduring challenges for those involved in supporting learning in the workplace.

Context and Cultures

Socio-cultural views of workplace learning emphasise how workplace contexts and cultures play a crucial role in affording or hindering opportunities for learning (Billett 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991). Yet there are large differences in the extent to which workplaces are rich learning environments (Deutscher and Braunstein 2023). What Fuller and Unwin (2003) call an expansive-restrictive continuum results in variable opportunities for learning in the workplace. Successful workplace learning requires collective support and responsibility from the whole community of practice, not just single individuals designated as 'trainers' or 'mentors', but support for learning is often left in the hands of one person (Ceelan et al 2023).

Collaborative commitment

Research in countries with a successful record of workplace training emphasises the importance of a relationship of social exchange and trust between different partners involved – including workplace trainers, company management, education and training providers and worker representatives. This does not mean the commitment of different stakeholders is based on the same motivations. The shared aim may be to train learners to an industry level of competence, but each has its own priorities and concerns. The emphasis on how learning supports business and adds value for companies contrasts with a focus in education and training settings on successful outcomes for the learner/trainee. The latter may not take account of the political realities and social relations of the workplace as experienced by employees and how these affect workplace learning (Evans et al 2011). Furthermore reciprocity and trust amongst stakeholders are not limitless and have to be constantly renegotiated.

Competence and capabilities of workplace 'teachers'

Experienced workers do not automatically have the repertoire of skills needed to enable and support workplace learning. Anything from five to fourteen different strategies for supporting learning have been identified in recent research, including modelling, guiding, monitoring, scaffolding and coaching (Ceelan et al 2023; De Bruijn 2012). So an important challenge

concerns what sort of support and what sort of staff development there is within the workplace and partner education and training providers to successfully enable high quality learning.

Recontextualization of knowledge and learning

Finally, the recontextualization and integration of knowledge across workplace and formal learning sites plays a crucial role. Here learners/trainees are seen as key: they move between sites and have to integrate the learning from each environment (Harris 2019). It is their experiences from one community of practice to the other that combine to form an integrated knowledge of theory and practice. Guile (2020) proposes that a productive way of preparing learners to recontextualise and integrate knowledge is through the social practice of giving and asking for reasons. In doing so, both learners and vocational experts are required to explicate the judgements they make and to recontextualise their forms of knowing to one another.

Concluding comments

Effective workplace learning is always work in progress, needing to be negotiated and renegotiated. Workplaces change and they are affected by wider social, political and economic conditions. The work of those involved in supporting learning as teachers, trainers, mentors and colleagues, in the workplace and in learning and training contexts, shifts and changes - not least in response to developments in how workplace learning is 'recognised' and certified. So the underlying but central challenge is to understand supporting workplace learning as continuously "under construction". This blog has highlighted four key aspects that are crucial: workplace contexts and cultures; collaborative commitment amongst those involved; the competences and capacities of those with a designated role to support learning in the workplace; and finally, but fundamentally, practices that place learners at the forefront, and enable them to recontextualise and integrate their knowledge and skills across workplace contexts and formal learning environments in meaningful and productive ways.



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