Introduction

The Centre for Work-Based Learning (CWBL) wants everyone to think differently about learning at work. This document is an introduction to the pedagogical ideas informing the Learner Journey work-stream of the CWBL agenda. The document is designed to be thought-provoking and is therefore deliberately speculative in tone. It aims to stimulate debate and discussion among stakeholder groups. It is planned that ideas generated from these discussions will feed into the further development of the CWBL programme of activities and platform of partnership developments.

The Learner Journey is one of 4 overlapping topics the Centre will explore. The other streams are Influencing Change, Impacts and Future Skills. The Learner Journey work-stream has a particularly close connection with Future Skills. This latter work-stream considers the impact of technological change on future skills requirements. A unique Skills Map for Scotland’s Future is emerging from this work and will be discussed at the forthcoming round table event.

The value of Work-based learning

Research in the field of Work-Based Learning (WBL) is gaining traction in policy and academic circles across the UK and further afield, just as it continues to be of interest to industry. A growing body of voices and accompanying literature point towards a pressing need for effective WBL programmes integrated at all levels of the education system. In parallel the exponential change anticipated as a result of advances in technology that are reconfiguring the workplace as an environment of enquiry, also point towards a marked increase of interest in WBL. For decades professionals have debated the importance of parity of esteem between academic and vocational education. The emerging developments in work-based learning promote a progressive and integrated skills development opportunity for Scotland. These developments present an opportunity for stakeholders to raise the pedagogical standard and cultural value of vocational education in Scotland and internationally.

WBL acknowledges that skills-based work is imbued with both skills and knowledge based learning opportunities not always recognized by broader society as educationally significant or valuable. WBL programmes, when suitably planned and administered, give academic recognition to the tacit knowledge produced by workers. Progressive examples of WBL ask workers to develop an understanding of how they learn in work and how the learning process impacts upon the workplace encouraging them to re-evaluate their skills, knowledge and capabilities for continuing career progression. In Lester’s (2004) terms WBL encourages workers to be ‘map-makers rather than map-readers’. This useful metaphor presents the work-based learner as an explorer of sorts charting, within the parameters agreed by the employer, their own personal work-learning journey.

There are significant benefits for stakeholders who engage in progressive approaches to WBL. Studies have shown that where well-managed WBL opportunities exist, employees tend to have an increased understanding and awareness of their job. If delivered well, WBL can increase the ‘absorptive capacity’ of the workforce, thereby enhancing innovation and productivity. It can also begin to address issues
Progressive Work-based Learning Pedagogies

Progressive WBL pedagogies conceive of learning as a social activity, within which individuals recognise the authenticity of their learning and learn not only from teachers but from their peers, work-colleagues and from their wider community. As such, WBL pedagogies encourage the development of new skills, knowledge and work-related personal development. The development and delivery of WBL programmes should therefore be determined by industry demand and involve multiple stakeholders including, amongst others, employers, learners and professionals from the learning and skills sector. This emphasis on learning as a social activity is further amplified with ongoing advances in technologies, which can now facilitate learning communities containing people from different backgrounds and levels of expertise; technology which supports communication and productivity within the community; and engagement in activity.

Progressive WBL pedagogies encourage reflective practice. This enables learners to move beyond what they know to creating new knowledge and skills and to the application of these in real contexts. In this sense the objective of WBL is to produce ‘reflective practitioners’. This notion of the reflective practitioner as an active learner that can produce and apply their knowledge and skills in the real-world reinforces the need for innovative, multi-skilled and self-directed worker-learners needed in the future workplace. This is recognised as best delivered through a teacher-learner partnership, and consequently, for some, a change in pedagogy. Contemporary pedagogies will also demand contemporary assessment approaches, and this too lies within the pedagogies work-stream.

Many of the pedagogical approaches touched on here have been with us for some time. Contemporary literatures on WBL borrow heavily from, for example, the theories of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky: theories that have been given new relevance and potential with ongoing advances in digital learning. However, it is evident that balancing the demands of the workplace and the need to develop professional practice while fostering a culture of enquiry that supports personal development and maintains academic validity will present challenges. Nevertheless, CWBL proposes professionals from both education and industry will benefit from a collaborative approach. The priorities and implementation of purposeful Continuing Professional Development (CPD) will sit within this work-stream, leading to further research and development as a key part of the Centre’s work.

With these challenges in mind but also enthused by the potential for developments in WBL to stimulate wider change in both Scotland’s education and skills system and its workplace organisational culture the Learner Journey work-stream considers the following questions concerning WBL pedagogies.

Key questions

- What pedagogical strategies are currently used in WBL programmes?
- What challenges does Scotland face in implementing similar strategies?
• What can we learn from current work-based learning activities led by SDS and partners?
• How might we best harness the potential of ICT in WBL learning, while also remaining alert to its negative impacts?
• Which partners need to become involved to create a sustainable WBL infrastructure?
• In terms of development, delivery and assessment, what are the key roles played by each partner?

Bibliography


