

## RESEARCHING WORK AND LEARNING: A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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For many people interested in “work and learning”, these are exciting times. At long last, it could be argued, there is the growing recognition by all interested “stakeholders” of the importance and contribution of “learning” to what is commonly understood as “work”. Indications of this growing recognition abound and are scattered throughout countries north and south, east and west. Evidence of these changes underway within the “work and learning” field is provided from a wide variety of sources. Some commentators allude to the proliferating growth of workshops and seminars centred on themes of “best-practice” or case-study experience in particular enterprises. Other commentators highlight the numerous policy initiatives, reports and reforms designed to ensure a “skilled workforce” or a “learning workforce” that is able to withstand the fierce winds of competition unleashed as a result of global economic forces. Whether in Mexico, Australia or South Africa, sweeping reform programmes are introduced which confidently pronounce and predict a growing interrelationship between knowledge, skills and the labour market. Significant new sums of funding, often aligned to new systems of accreditation and certification are announced. Everywhere, it seems, the existing education and training systems are seen as falling short of that required in the early years of the new millennium. Education, from primary school through to higher education institutions, is the subject of critical interrogation from policy makers for its apparent distance and aloofness from the perceived needs of the modern enterprise. Whether at a national level or at a regional level, elected bodies and multilateral agencies appear to be largely singing from the same hymn sheet; a capable and competent workforce is not only a prerequisite for economic health but, in the more extreme versions of this line of advocacy, is the most important ingredient in arriving at an appropriate policy mix for economic survival.

Underpinning these policy prescriptions is a recognition of the changing nature of work and work organisation. The growth and integration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) is usually identified as one of the principal drives in the shake-out and restructuring of the labour market, production processes and work relationships. In the wake of the identified and predicted changes seen as resulting from the growing importance and integration of ICT within the workplace, a new language seems to have emerged, especially in Anglo-American circles and literature. Jobless-growth, knowledge-workers, symbolic analysts, portfolio careers, information age and



“working smarter, not harder” are some of the better known phrases associated with the argument that significant changes are now underway that fundamentally alter how we produce goods and services. Implicit in the new language and the changes to which they refer, is the issue of competencies, skills, knowledge and learning. Rethinking how to best use the rediscovered ingredient of “human capital” has led to discussions and advocates for “the learning organisation” characterised by horizontal co-ordination, disbanding of traditional command and central management systems and the encouragement of more creative, information and people-focused activity with the enterprise. Partnerships, empowerment of employees, reciprocal trust and enhanced personal growth are, instead, the new corporate objectives required to maximise the utilisation and expression of creativity, imagination, ideas and experiences in the “workplaces of the future”.

Running alongside the contributions of those primarily interested in business and organisational changes in the workplace and in enterprise objectives, are those from a more pedagogical and training background. All of a sudden, apparently, adult education, continuous learning, personal and professional development and employee learning initiatives were rediscovered, dusted-down and “brought in from the cold”. The new emphasis on all employees, rather than only middle and senior management, having a valued contribution to make a “high-value enterprise” has led to a mainstream focus on widening provision and on those adults with minimal skills and qualifications. Whether in or out of work, attention intensified on the reasons and causes of low or non-participation in training or educational opportunities, especially amongst young workers or school leavers. This emphasis on the inclusion of traditionally excluded groups in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with shifts in political thinking about the responsibility (which usually meant financing) for this drive towards an expanded system of education and training. In many countries, individuals, rather than the State, or the employers, were to assume greater responsibility for ensuring their “employability” in the future. Pulling together all these varied professional interests focused on adults, rather than school participants, was the banner of “lifelong learning”. By the Year 2000, lifelong learning was the rapidly emerging policy focus in countries from around the world that seemed to incorporate the new ideas and thinking and provide some kind of direction or guide for policy development. Despite the difficulties of precise agreements about the definitions and policy implications of lifelong learning, the term was seen as legitimising the importance of learning (as opposed to education and training) and its on-going continuous nature (as opposed to completion as a young person). In most versions, lifelong learning was strongly justified and aligned with “economic instrumentalism” and seen as an individual’s responsibility, although wider themes such as a “civilised society” and citizenship sometimes made fleeting appearances. Education and training remained key areas of concern and attention but were now subsumed within a lifelong learning perspective. If the “new workplace” and “the new model worker” was the

summary contribution of the sociologists, human resource specialists and economists to the new thinking at the turn of the century, then “lifelong learning” was the contribution of the educationalists.

This multi-disciplinary contribution was, in fact, a further indication of the growing anticipation and confidences of those interested in the areas of “work and learning”. Here was a key area which, whether at a theoretical, policy and practice level, strongly encouraged a collaborative endeavour across the social sciences. All disciplines had something to contribute to, and learn from, each other. Failure to make these multi-disciplinary bridges could result in a partial and incomplete grasp of the complexities and interrelations characterising the “work and learning” area. Similarly, bridges & collaboration between enterprises and the academe were seen as important and were announced via new innovative partnership arrangements.

Although much of the attention and energy, especially in the partnerships between workplaces and educational and training agencies, were directed at the development and maintenance of initiatives within the enterprise, there were others who were more interested in trying to understand the wider societal linkages and assumptions seen as underpinning the growth in interest and practice of “work and learning”. That this interest coincided in timing with the millennium, often resulted in some rather extravagant and speculative claims by the more excited commentators. There was, nevertheless, a genuine interest in trying to move beyond the rhetoric in grasping the substance (assuming there was a substance to be grasped) of what was referred to as “the post-industrial society”, or “the information age”, or “the post-modern society”. Was the growing interest in work and learning, in other words, symptomatic of wider socio-economic changes in how we lived, what we considered important, how to produce and deliver goods and services and how we related to each other at a local and/or global level? Although sometimes pursued at a demanding level of abstraction within dense theoretical frameworks, the debates nevertheless contributed to the feeling that these were indeed “not normal times” for those routinely interested in education, training, learning and work.

### **The Leeds Conference**

It was against such a background of “excitement and anticipation” that we at the School of Continuing Education at the University of Leeds in England, decided to organise a conference entitled “Researching Learning and Work” in September 1999. We had, for many decades, worked in partnership with various labour market partners in the design and delivery of educational and training programmes and, in consolidating this work, had more recently focused on work-related learning and established a university-wide Work-Related Learning Section and a research based, Lifelong Learning Institute. As adult educationalists, we shared much of the “excitement and anticipation”

that developed among interested stakeholders in the 1990s around issues connected with “work and learning”. We, like many other university adult educationalists in the last thirty years or so, had participated in the transition from the “Cinderella” domain to a more mainstream focus at both an institutional and a policy level. Suddenly it seemed, after years in the wilderness, there was everywhere an interest in “adults learning”. The sense of relief mingled with anticipation about future possibilities. By the mid-1990s, however, for us in the UK at least, this anticipation was matched by a growing unease over the direction of future activity and effort and the unexamined assumptions and interests that increasingly characterised the emerging consensus over what constituted “work and learning”. A tidal wave of shared interests, values and future priorities threatened to sweep away all before it (and was often advocated most strongly by those who had previously shown very little interest in the area and subject matter). Layer upon layer of policy prescriptions, it seemed, were being erected upon flimsy and shifting foundations. The source of our unease is examined in further detail in the section below. It was this unease, however, that resulted in the organising of the September 1999 conference. Our own work at Leeds, we felt, would benefit from a research-focused dialogue with colleagues from the UK and elsewhere. Instead of the increasingly dominating forums of “how-to-do-it” and “good practice guides”, we wanted to create some space for interested parties to examine critically what was happening and why it was happening. Although we were not sure if these feelings of “unease” were shared by other colleagues, we were pleasantly surprised first, by some 80–90 papers being accepted for the conference by the referees and secondly, by the large number of international participants. As might be expected within so diverse and large an area as “work and learning”, the topics addressed within the papers were numerous and varied and reflected a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

The papers that have been included in this special edition of the *Journal* have been selected to demonstrate this variety of interests and perspectives jostling together under the “work and learning” label. They include analytical, theoretical and empirical driven articles and in most cases, involve arguments around themes designed to open-up, rather than close-down, debates about what constitutes “learning and work”. There is, in other words, a modest critical perspective by the authors against what they see as a growing orthodoxy in their particular subject matter. In their different ways and from their different perspectives, they collectively act as a break towards the superficial and increasingly “glossy” view of the world presented in the opening section to this introduction. Above all, they indicate (again, from their own viewpoints) both the contested and complex nature of many of the ideas and assumptions shaping the current clamour for work and learning (or work-based learning or work-related learning).

We were, therefore, very pleased with the Leeds Conference. We were not alone; there were other practitioners and researchers “out there” who realised

that a substantial amount of work, both in our thinking and in the development of innovative forms of practice, was still required. In the main, contributors did acknowledge that wider socio-economic changes were underway but, depending on the audiences that they were working with and from where in the world they came from, differed in the extent and nature of these changes. Attitudes towards, and experiences of, “work” were changing it was suggested, but it was felt that we were only at the beginning of the process of adequately grasping the nature of these changes and what counts as “learning”. More attention and help, it was felt, was needed from our colleagues in sociology, economics and industrial relations in unravelling the threads and intricacies of these labour market and organisational changes within the more commonly depoliticised and uncritical formulations of “work”. There, similarly, was a strong move away from the more traditional psychological dominated agenda underpinning understandings of “learning” towards one that instead situates learning as part of a culturally embedded aspect of human action. To understand and study learning, it is necessary to consider the local practices of the learner and to situate these practices against the unfolding lives of learners in different contexts. Such an approach not only “opens up” appreciation of what is to count as learning but also incorporates concerns of “informal learning” outside of the traditional and unhelpful dichotomy of formal-informal. Perhaps as a reaction against the dominance of the “formal” professionally-defined agendas of the recent past, there was a healthy interest in many of the Conference presentations in the whole non-formal learning agenda.

Other themes which attempted to resist the seemingly ever-tightening and constraining business-dominated agendas of learning being equated with success, wealth, jobs and prosperity, were those that deliberately engaged with such policy developments, but from the perspective of voluntary aspirations and from the vantage point of labour organisations. Skill development and human capital formulations are important for enterprise as are human development strategies that stress the importance of “knowledge” for “new” economic and production thinking. However, less rarely mentioned or even acknowledged, argue the alternative trade union or community perspectives, is the growing and alarming patterns of economic and political inequality that seemingly underpin the move towards the “knowledge economy”. Clearly identifiable within nation states and also between the “First” and “Third World”, this massive increase in inequality raises important ideological issues of social exclusion and social justice that tend to be conveniently “swept under the carpet”. Failure to recognise and address such issues, it is suggested, risks the well intentioned efforts of practitioners and researchers within the area of “work and learning” being encapsulated or hijacked by corporate business agendas.

*Absent voices*

We were pleased therefore with both the quality and variety of presentations at the Leeds Conference that explored and engaged with many of the assumptions and “taken-for-granted” values shaping the “work and learning” area. Equally welcome was the range of case studies that illustrated innovative practices within workplaces or between workplaces and educational and training agencies. We were also aware, however, that there were “gaps” in the issues raised in the papers and discussed at the Conference. These “gaps” largely stemmed from cross-sections of participants able to attend the Leeds Conference. Without sponsorship, we were unable to ensure that a representation of all or, at least, many other “voices” were able to be present and to raise their concerns and share their experiences with those that were present. Despite eighteen countries being “represented” at the Conference, on the whole the participants were from institutions and countries that could financially afford to participate in such gatherings. Absent, for example, were strong voices from “southern” countries and from regions experiencing “transitional” measures in the post-communist economies. On the whole, the context within which most of the papers were situated was, understandably, that of the “First World”. Experiencing “globalisation”, “late capitalism” or “post modernism” or understanding what constitutes “work” from the perspective of the “missing” audiences would have added a welcome extra dimension to the Conference discussions. “Work and learning” within a regional or country context characterised by recent rapid urbanisation and a “displaced peasantry” provides a different “spin” to perspectives and concerns arising from “knowledge” strategies pursued by large multinational enterprises! The overwhelming emphasis at the Leeds Conference on the “formal economy”, similarly, marginalised concerns particular to the “informal sector”. The discussions around “informal learning”, that did take place at Leeds, however, suggested linkages and shared concerns that hinted at possible areas that might contribute towards bridging the research agendas between the “different worlds”. Given the supposed inter-linking economically underway as part of the globalisation process, it is important to find ways and means of overcoming the gaps in the research agendas and to include the “absent voices”.

The second noticeable “absent voice” from the Leeds Conference, was that of employees – the subjects of many of the reported research activities. Although obviously present in many of the research papers – often in their own words due to the strong qualitative research methodologies adopted by the researchers – having employees present and participating in the presentations and discussions of “their” project would have, again, added a different dimension, insight and richness to the proceedings over the three days.

## Conclusion

The papers selected for this special edition of the Journal have been chosen to reflect some of the concerns that were presented and discussed at Leeds. They are not necessarily representative but instead reflect the wide variety of issues seen as important by both practitioners and researchers alike. Above all, they suggest a shared excitement that is tempered by an aversion to any “quick-fix” solutions to issues that are both complex and contested.

*Copies of the full Conference Proceedings are available from Mrs Stef Howard, School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK*

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