

## **Work integrated learning: a guide to effective practice**

L. Copper, J. Orrell and M. Bowden, 2010

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The authors, building on issues raised during empirical work in the mid-1990s, seek to provide a resource for academics and managers supporting 'work integrated learning'. For the authors, 'work integrated learning' has a specific meaning. It is 'the intersection and engagement of theoretical and practice learning. The process of bringing together formal learning and productive work, or theory and practice' (p. xiii). They identify seven key dimensions that need to be considered: '*purpose; context; nature of the integration; curriculum issues; the learning; partnerships between university and the workplace or community; and the support provided to the student and the workplace*' (p. 37), and the majority of the book is a consideration of these themes, though structured around the more traditional areas of learning, teaching and assessment, and management. In addition there are a number of scene setting chapters covering the higher education context and the authors' conceptualisation of 'work integrated learning'. Whilst clearly grounded in an Australian context, the authors nevertheless have engaged with, and learnt from, others working in the field from a range of universities largely in the tradition of western liberal education.

As a practical guide to thinking through 'work integrated learning', I found some interesting tips on supporting students, tutors and workplaces in setting up and sustaining such activity. However, I have two specific criticisms. Firstly, the lack of empirical justification of the authors' practical tips and secondly, their theoretical conception of work integrated learning. Both of these may be seen as simply 'academic' concerns (pejoratively construed), and such criticisms may well be deemed unfair given the authors claim to be writing 'a hands on approach to the everyday activities of work integrated learning...' (p. 9). Yet, the effective application of the techniques and their development for a range of contexts requires some consideration of the underlying theoretical ideas of the authors. Further, given the subject area and the intended audience (higher education practitioners) one might have expected a more detailed reflection on the relationship between theory and practice.

Firstly, as a practical guide this book seeks to be much more than just some well founded practical principles picked up from others experiences of work integrated learning, at the very least it seeks to be generalisable to a range of higher education contexts. It is unfair to suggest that there is insufficient study of the domain, but rather there is a lack of coherence and specificity to the account given. Compare this book with, for example, Burton Clark's (1998) account of the entrepreneurial university. Clark, grounding his account on thick descriptions of real cases, extracts key principles for reproduction in other contexts. He presents illuminating and practical principles and a qualitative defence of such principles. This book on the other hand offers practical illustrations not compelling evidence for adoption of the authors' ideas.

Secondly, the way that any problem is 'set up' does to some extent direct attention to potential solutions. Copper et al are to be commended on their articulation of work integrated learning and the oppositional nature of theory versus practice: a nature that needs to be overcome by a variety of techniques. However, they do not justify such an account or seem to recognise its 'contestable nature'. We might look alternatively, for example, to MacIntyre's (1987) argument that the

academic disciplines become, during the enlightenment, distorted and alienated from their primary purpose; that is the resolution of practical social problems. As such the modern disciplines and their offspring, theory, are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The problem is with the way theoretical discourses are conceptualised, which no technique will ameliorate.

In summary, the book offers tips and techniques and will no doubt offer direction to those new to work integrated learning, but there remain some critical limitations. These are not so much with the authors take on the problem and the evidence for its effective resolution, but with the lack of consideration of these issues. As such, one is limited in the confidence one should place on the ideas presented. Perhaps less practice and more theory would have been helpful.

### **References**

- Clark, B.R. (1998) *Creating entrepreneurial universities: organizational pathways of transformation* (Oxford, Pergamon).
- MacIntyre, A. (1987) The idea of an educated public, in G. Haydon (Ed) *Education and values: the Richard Peters Lectures* (London, Institute of Education) pp.15-36.

**Richard Davies**, De Montfort University, UK