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Learning, Boundary Crossing and Activity Systems: The Case of the Foundation Degree at Restaurants Ltd

Maryam Herin* and Nicola Morrell**

***Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to examine the link between Higher Education learning and the reconstruction of the learning back in the workplace, in a case study organisation with graduands from the foundation degree. Results from the interviews and questionnaires suggested that the respondents felt the learning was used back in the workplace. This study provides examples of the reconstructed learning. In conclusion, there is clear evidence of learning and linkages between HE learning and the reconstruction of learning in the workplace using the activity theory model. It is the nature of the assessment objects and the philosophy and culture driving the degree that largely facilitates this reconstruction of learning. The paper seeks to contribute to the scarce data identified in the work based learning literature identified by Smith et al (2013).*

Key words: reconstruction of learning, activity-systems.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the connections between Higher Education (HE) learning and understanding how learning is applied back in the workplace in a small scale case study using Engeströms' activity theory (2001). This will be done by evaluating the learning undertaken by a group of HE students studying for a foundation degree in a case study organisation, RLtd.

RLtd have a work-based learning approach of the foundation degree philosophy, which is to ensure that the learning has value to the business. This links to Ghobadian (2010) statement that work based learning (WBL) programmes specifically tailored to employers' needs might well be part of a viable remedy which may help the partnership with industry and academia, and the overall value of education to the economy and business. This is especially relevant to this study, which in part sets out to prove his diagnosis, not only on WBL but in a wider context also. This is to support Ghobadian's (2010) diagnosis of a rapidly increasing academia-praxis "gulf", i.e. where business school academic researchers are not addressing the needs of businesses enough.

Foundation degrees (FD's) in the UK were introduced under the Labour government (Dfes, 2003) as an intermediate, vocational-based sub-degree qualification that would meet the needs of employers. This study contributes to the government agenda of developing the workforce and business. Harvey (2009) undertook a literature review of research surrounding FDs, and one particular finding from this study demonstrated a need for further research into FDs. Boud and Soloman (2001) define work-based learning as "a partnership is established between an external organisation and an educational establishment specifically to foster learning", further specifying "learning projects are undertaken with the given needs of the workplace" and highlighting "learning is designed not just to extend the skills and knowledge of the individual but to make a difference to the organisation".

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This is critical as it benefits the student with a qualification, RLtd with increased customers and therefore more profits, and the HEI with more income, as per the service profit chain model (Heskett et al, 1994). This programme is an example of the attempt to create a closely aligned relationship between learning and practice, aligned to business goals.

This study investigates this learning reconstruction based on Engestrom's model (1987):

1. How and to what extent is the learning reconstructed back in the workplace?
2. To what extent does boundary crossing and the use of activity theory (Engestrom, 1987) help or hinder the reconstruction of learning?
3. What do the students find most useful?

Key concepts and arguments contained in this literature to support this study are discussed below.

2. Literature Review

Longhurst's (2010) claim that the design of Foundation degrees will provide a different but valued and genuinely improved provision for students and employers is critical to this study. Saunders (2006) uses a functionalist narrative as a means of explaining how the education role should have many facets relating to equipping people with skills and knowledge required by Industry. Critically, this view presupposes that Industry requirements are understood. Individuals and organisations can invest in education and "this investment will pay back, in increased wealth creation, productivity and competitiveness, and in individual terms, in better jobs, more money, prestige and life chances" (Saunders, 2006; Brennan et al., 1996). This is a logical and accepted theory, but some university faculties have been criticised as being out of touch with the society and industry it serves as "currently higher learning is often still too much a matter of classroom experience of book knowledge that is not sufficiently related to reality" (Van Rooijen, 2012). The RLtd case study shows the curriculum has been purposefully designed to encompass both the HE knowledge and the practical needs of the workplace.

A social practice is behaviour as we have already discussed which is recurrent and shaped by a complex set of personal and collective knowledge resources (Wenger 1999). Evaluative research requires that something new has happened, something has changed in practice so the concept of practice is a Giddensian (1979) one. The diagram below is a depiction of the transfer of learning in RLtd of the foundation degree as an activity system: orientating evaluative research into the work environment (adapted from Saunders, 2012).

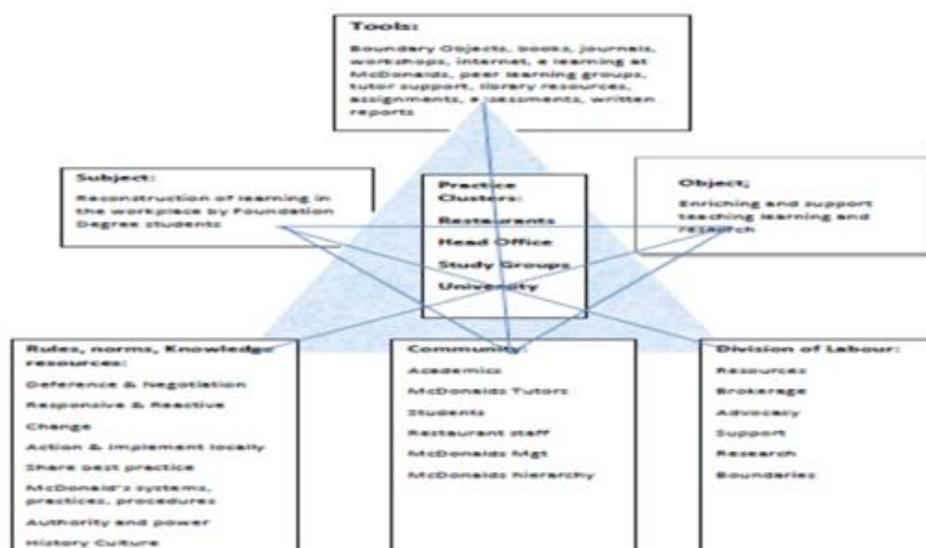


Figure 1: Transfer of learning

Within the activity system, the relationships in the community are highlighted, and as Vygotsky (1978) noted it assists in identifying where power dimensions may lie, as this may have been under-emphasised in Wenger (1999). For example, in the case study the power of the management and the tutors at Head Office yield high power, as this affects not only the career direction of the student, but the job itself, as judgements are made about capabilities based on the outcomes of the degree.

The activity system is useful in that it helps in identifying what resources may be available, for example who and what exists to assist in achieving the goal with the reconstruction of knowledge. The division of labour and its impact on the reconstruction will be evaluated in the study. The clusters of practice at the heart of the model are vital to show the student and tutors the boundaries to be crossed, and the boundary objects and boundaries to be crossed in order for the reconstruction to be successful. At times, this may be undertaken knowingly, whereas at other times, this is simply done unconsciously as it is the right thing to do, and the learning from the foundation degree acts as the catalyst. The locus of power is not prominent in social practice theory but it does appear in this case study in a number of ways, and in a variety of guises, and will be explored in the results.

Another pertinent perspective in this context on HE/work connectedness is boundary crossing, and this is important because of the time and place. The tutors are brokers as they help to sift and select the knowledge and practice from the classroom applicable to a different context (i.e. RLtd) but so too are the managers themselves; this the boundary crossing becomes iterative as students physically attend the university premises and return to the workplace, and also with the assessments and knowledge crossing boundaries for submission, marking, grades being returned and learning transferred and then reconstructed and used in the workplace. It is recognised that learning has to cross boundaries, and as Akkerman et al (2010) state, boundaries are becoming more numerous and explicit because of increasing specialization. The term boundary and boundary-crossing (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995) encapsulates the challenges in education and work to create possibilities for learning, participation and collaboration across a diversity of sites, both within and across institutions (Ludvigsen et al, 2010).

Hargreaves (2000) identifies situations where the professional uses learning back in the workplace and is where a work situation is no longer effective or efficient so the “professional uses their knowledge repertoire”. According to Lave (1988) the situated approach to learning is most effective when there is genuine participation in activities such as work.

Engestrom (1987) questioned what is done with the learning back in the workplace and what key actions are taken. This is important because of what the learner does with their learning (or not) on their return to the workplace. For situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), motivation to learn stems from participation in culturally-valued collaborative practices in which something useful is produced. The boundary crossing narrative offered by Saunders (2012) highlights new perspectives on the relationships between education, learning and work. This relates to the notion of transfer use or reconstruction of knowledge in the workplace, as these words do not do justice to the complex social and cognitive process interaction that occurs as boundary crossing is undertaken (Beach, 2003). This is at the heart of what this study aims to show: what exactly have the students at RLtd done with their learning? The next section will explain the methodology used in the data collection and analysis

3. Research Methodology

This small-scale pilot study was conducted in RLtds with the latest cohort of foundation degree students (20 in total) to provide the latest perceptions and observations of what is actually happening in the workplace. Dexter and Seden (2012) highlighted the value of small scale research projects as having many positive impacts, amongst those being how the projects have benefited students and staff enhanced the organisational culture, provided richer and deeper learning opportunities, provided a strengthened ethos of continuous learning and improvement and identifying and addressing barriers to better practice.

Semi-structured interviews with 4 students, and two questionnaires (30% of the cohort graduands in 2013/14) provided the data for this research. 30% of this cohort is a reasonable sample of the whole population in terms of age, gender mix and geographical location mix. The students are mature part-time students, and speak from a managerial position within the RLtd, all managing and responsible for a Restaurant operation. It also allowed for comparison between the respondents. The interviews and questionnaires were coded for confidentiality purposes.

The argument for considering a social practice approach to the problems of use and usability is based on a concept of evaluation impact (the use of an evaluation to produce positive change) (Saunders 2012). In thematic analysis the data gathering instruments have to acknowledge that there are other activity systems which will interfere or impact in some way. This may explain why despite reassurances about the personal confidentiality, only two questionnaires were received, and the methodology gained much richer data by semi-structured interview. A brief comment is required on the return rate, as it was unusually low: it could also have been that the timing was inappropriate, as students had just graduated and completed their studies: it was a very busy time in their restaurants in the summer with staff leave and increased customer footfall, and consequently other priorities may have overtaken this survey.

4. Main Findings

This study set out to establish how and to what extent the learning undertaken by students completing the Foundation Degree at RLtd is reconstructed back in the workplace using boundary crossing and activity systems. The key findings are as follows:

1. A significant finding is that 100% of respondents agreed that they had learnt NEW things on the foundation degree, and it pinpoints where the most important learning is in the curriculum (leadership, business planning and internal communications)
2. The new learning and knowledge WAS USED to change things back in the restaurant and workplace: There is clear evidence of reconstructed learning (Colignon 1989) to enhance business operations in the restaurant and this has been evidenced by changed operational practices such as procedures, checklists, staffing, recruitment, rotas and business plans.
3. The number of actions taken are significant (more than 5 per student).
4. Boundary crossing from workplace to university and Head office gave the students time to think and reflect on the reconstruction of learning. The activity system discussed earlier (based on Saunders 2012) helps our understanding, e.g. the clusters of practice (Wenger 1999): the respondents reported they were very motivated after the on-site sessions at the university and Head offices as these boundary- crossings gave them a chance to reflect and reconcile theory and learning with the practice back in the workplace. These learning contexts (Saunders 1995) were a very important part of the reconstruction process and its success.
5. A significant finding is that 100% reported that the written report was THE most useful form of assessment as it contained a compulsory action plan which they could take back to the restaurant and implement. This correlates to the study by Ooms et al (2011) where it was found that when assignments are work-related, they become more meaningful or relevant for the students.
6. The main barriers to implementing the learning in the workplace were old paradigms of thinking and working by the managers; When asked about issues or barriers to the implementation of the learning, the main comment was “knowledge I didn’t have at the start” (respondent 1), “getting used to using the new knowledge in an operation that you have been used to for years” (Respondent 3). This shows a very positive response, and also one that owns the responsibility for the reconstruction and transfer of the learning.
7. The benefits of small scale research identified by Dexter and Seden (2012) were also seen in the outputs of this case study, namely positive impacts such as an enhanced organisational culture, richer learning opportunities, a strengthened ethos of continuous learning and improvement and best practice was shared.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that the learning undertaken by the RLtd on the foundation degree is reconstructed back in the workplace, and there is evidence to show the learning has been applied to the business. This research demonstrated how boundary-crossing and the use of activity theory (Engestrom, 1987) aids learning reconstruction. This model assists identifying and understanding. Students can see a clear line of sight from across the boundaries of the education to the workplace and back. This paper supports Ghobadian’s (2010) assertion that (WBL) programmes specifically tailored to employers' needs can help the partnership with industry and academia, and the overall value of education to the economy and

business. It also supports his argument which suggests that academic business researchers do not address the needs of businesses enough and if more was done it could relieve pressure on the “burgeoning academia-praxis "gulf". The activity system is an important depiction of RLtd’s reconstruction of learning system, demonstrating complex interconnectivities and power plays involved.

The literature has shown that there are a number of perspectives on work connectedness, and many of these can be seen in this study. It is the extent to which these are effective in the RLtds context which will be new, with a foundation degree that is designed, delivered and assessed by RLtd that is not an educational institution.

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