

# Rethinking vocational education: a case study in care

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The authors explain how development of employability and educational interest might be enhanced by a radically different division of labour between FECs (Further Education Colleges) and the institutions in which students live and work. They argue that, rather than looking for ways in which FECs could teach vocational knowledge in a more relevant way, the role of FECs might be to develop students' educational interest through analytical reflection on their life and work. The authors tried out these ideas with 25 adult returners to formal education who hope to secure jobs as professional carers. The theoretical perspective known as situated learning is contrasted with one which implies that transfer of learning from classroom to workplaces is relatively unproblematic and that cognitive operations are relatively unaffected by culture.

## Introduction

There is now widespread agreement that encouraging people to engage in learning opportunities throughout their lifetime is central to the economic and social well being of the UK. Yet research commissioned by the Campaign for Learning showed that the majority of the population have no immediate plans to undertake learning. It also showed that few temporary and part-time workers, unemployed people, older adults, people without qualifications, working class people and those who left school early are engaged in formal education (Tuckett 1997). While the reasons for low participation rates are complex it may well be that learning as formally conceived within educational institutions is seen by learners to be unconnected with their interests.

Any serious attempt to address this situation may require radical changes in the vocational education curriculum. In Britain it is possible for adults to achieve accreditation of their competence in a specific job through the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework. Our concern is not with work-based NVQs, but with courses leading to the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and in particular to the General Scottish Vocational Qualification (GSVQ), which are intended to provide a broad based vocational education and a route into Higher Education, rather than job specific competence. The advent of GNVQs/GSVQs coincided with claims that employers increasingly required what came to be described as 'core skills'. Although GNVQ and GSVQ curricula were developed out of the competence based principles of NVQs, curricula were designed to be provided predominantly in further education colleges rather than the workplace.

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We argue against the idea of a decontextualized vocational preparation and for the idea of learning through practice. That is not to argue that there is no role for further education of a vocational kind. It is, however, to argue that students are more likely to learn to think and act effectively at work and elsewhere if there is a radically different division of educational labour, between the further education sector and the institutions in which students live and work, than the one that exists at present. We tried out these ideas in the context of social care work. Our purpose is to initiate a fresh conversation about preparing people for work and educational inclusion rather than to demonstrate that particular techniques 'work' better than others.

### **Criticisms of vocationalism in the further education curriculum**

Vocationalism in the further education curriculum may be seen to rest on the assumption that the transfer of knowledge and skills learned in classrooms to work contexts is relatively unproblematic. Hyland and Johnson (1998) call this 'the mythology of transferability'. Empirical research suggests, however, that people think differently depending on the context for which thinking has a point. Garnham and Oakhill's (1994) review of research suggests that any transfer is usually within a domain, such as mathematics. Evidence of transfer from classrooms to workplace is scant (Drew 1998). Faith in the notion of transfer is damaged by evidence that people's thinking seems to depend on complex factors in the workplace setting, not least the salience of activities for individuals and perceived expectations of colleagues and employers (Lave 1988b, Lave and Wenger 1991, Engestrom 1996, Scribner 1984, 1985, 1986). Vocationalism in the further education curriculum also may be seen to rest on the assumption that learning in classrooms is an effective and efficient way of preparing people for work. Evidence suggests that sophisticated work related understandings seem to occur with considerably less effort outside educational institutions than inside them (Ceci and Liker 1986, Lave 1988b, Carraher *et al.* 1985).

Carraher *et al.* (1985) showed that Brazilian street children who earn a living by selling things, demonstrated some remarkable mathematical abilities and that they could adapt their numerical operations to solving novel problems. Hatano (1988) suggests that the reason these children are so good at mathematics is because they are engaged in an interpersonal exchange that requires semantic transparency to prevent the customer from becoming suspicious. A striking example of the effectiveness of learning by doing real work comes from Ceci and Liker's study of expert racing tipsters whose sophisticated statistical reasoning had been learned in racetracks. There is now a substantial body of research on what people learn at work and how they learn it (Eraut *et al.* 1999).

Such evidence is consistent with the theoretical perspective known as situated learning, which is rooted in the belief that learning is equivalent to the acquisition of the beliefs and practices that are specific to a particular culture, whether that culture be the one of a particular academic discipline or of a school, a workplace or an inner city (Brown *et al.* 1989). Brown *et al.* argue that the formal knowledge that is taught in schools is 'arbitrary' and difficult for students to learn because it comes originally from a different culture (e.g. the culture of mathematicians), but is taught as if it were independent of the original cultural context in which it is normally acquired and used. This seems to imply that vocational learning would be more effective if it were situated in real work which matters to students and others. Carrying out vocational preparation

in Colleges of Further Education can be understood as a doomed attempt to decontextualize learning. The result of making such an attempt is a desperate search for a context that is very often provided by the requirements of an assessment or curriculum authority. As Anderson *et al.* (1997) found, teachers and students engage in a kind of 'SCOTVEC speak', which was the language of the assessment authority for vocational education in Scotland. (SCOTVEC was the Scottish Vocational Education Council, now the Scottish Qualifications Authority).

The notion of situated learning resonates with research that purports to show that expertise arises from knowledge becoming integrated and transformed through practice (Chi *et al.* 1988, Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993). Through the performance of real tasks, formal knowledge seems to become fused with, fine-tuned and transformed to the demands of a particular practice. Non-situated theories of learning that are influential in vocational education, such as Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb 1984), imply that students become competent by learning to engage in a sequence of cognitive operations that are not significantly changed by cultures. Implicit too in such theories is the idea that people need explicit instruction in order to acquire these operations. There is little support for these assumptions in the evidence that supports a 'situated' perspective and which is cited above.

### **Rethinking vocational education**

The theoretical perspective known as situated learning implies that people are most likely to become employable by doing real work in real contexts. Lave and Wenger (1991) provide a 'situated' account of learning at work. Through 'legitimate peripheral participation' people acquire the beliefs and practices specific to a particular workplace culture. This framework does not make any assumptions about transfer. 'Legitimate peripheral participation' is like an apprenticeship. It is legitimate in the sense that the 'newcomers' are making a difference to the goals of a community of practitioners, although initially their participation is peripheral. Gradually they take on a wider range of tasks, learning from 'old-timers'.

What is learned in the course of 'legitimate peripheral participation' is knowledge of the characteristics of and how to engage in a practice. Such engagement involves talking as well as acting. For 'newcomers', the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for participating in the practice itself, but to learn *to* talk as a key to participation. Thus engaging in a practice is a condition for any kind of learning.

One of the difficulties in working with this perspective is that Lave and Wenger (1991) do not say exactly what they mean by a practice nor how practices could be distinguished. It may be that practices are distinguished according to the occupations that are their prime concerns. However, modern occupations are nothing like so coherent as they once were when crafts and guilds were prominent. In any case, there will obviously be significant differences in the way that different firms carry out the same occupation and there is a sense in which people have to learn afresh the nuances of practice in different contexts. Moreover, practices plainly overlap to different degrees and it seems to us to be unhelpful to try to map once and for all the areas of overlap because practices continually develop.

In our case study, a description of which follows, we are not claiming to be able to distinguish practices. All we claim is that we helped students to engage in a limited form of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in the cultural contexts in which vocational and

academic knowledge are acquired and used. In helping students to engage in academic practice we were reflecting the view of some situated theorists that students benefit from an induction into the culture of academic disciplines such as philosophy and psychology. Providing such an induction is inconsistent with Lave's (1998b) view that there is no good reason to hold this view. Implicit in Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory is the notion that a different set of social relations may emerge from learning in practice. However, given that our concern was with acting in the students' interests in the world as it is, we believe that there are good general reasons for inducting students into the culture and practice of traditional academic disciplines.

As Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) suggest, knowledge of traditional academic disciplines can play a significant role in the development of vocational expertise, becoming transformed and merged with work place acquired knowledge. Moreover, personal and communal development is enhanced if people are encouraged through formal education to broaden their interest beyond that which appears to be immediately vocationally useful. Colleges of Further Education as presently constituted, do provide contexts for inducting students into academic culture and practice. We are not advocating that Further Education lecturers should transmit disciplinary knowledge in traditional ways, but rather that they should encourage some rigour in critical reflection on students' lives and work.

Tutors, for example, could help students to analyse their work, drawing on ideas and methods from humanities and social science disciplines. Learning activities could include discussions about how students might determine their chosen work, what overall they wanted from that work, why they valued certain outcomes and why they preferred to pursue them in one way rather than another. These discussions could lead into talk about questioning what might be taken for granted, about having some idea of how the questions one raises might be answered, about grounds on which people might justify their preferences. Such discussions may be described as parts of the practice of social care. Equally, however, they may be described as forms of philosophy or psychology. Taking part in such discussions may be regarded as part of two or more parallel or serial forms of apprenticeship.

This can be contrasted with the current situation in the further education sector. There, students are expected to acquire and use vocational knowledge, not by doing real work, but by participating in tutor or peer led discussion of such knowledge, or by doing simulated work. The knowledge taught is 'arbitrary' in the sense that students are not inducted into the culture of the disciplines that generated the knowledge. Students in Business Administration courses, for example, are often told how to use psychometric tests for selecting employees and asked to consider the pros and cons of using such tests. In the psychology profession, there is an important discourse on the problematic nature of concepts on which such tests rest, such as ability and personality. Yet, typically, in FEC programmes, the topic is discussed as if there were no such discourse. Therefore, there is no induction into significant parts of psychologists' practice such as questioning the assumptions underlying perspectives. We are arguing that such induction is a more worthwhile role for FECs and that students could readily acquire competence in jobs such as test administration through 'peripheral participation' in Personnel Departments.

### A case study

Following Papert (1994: 26–7), who argues that exposing participants to a treatment of some sort and then looking for measurable results, flies in the face of all common knowledge of how human beings develop, a case study was used rather than an experimental design. Twenty-five adults participated. They had enrolled on a General Scottish Vocational Qualification (GSVQ) Social Care programme in a further education college and were typical of those who are the focus of the government's welfare to work plans. Almost all had experienced one or more of the following difficulties: long-term unemployment, mental health problems, drug dependency, poor housing. Many were single parents disadvantaged by long-term dependence on low incomes from insecure employment or social security benefits.

Two types of apprenticeship ran alongside each other. Each was designed to increase the benefit of the other. The first was in care work: doing something which made some difference to others' lives for at least one day a week over a nine month period. Since the students were volunteers rather than waged employees their participation was perhaps 'legitimate' in a more limited sense than is implied in Lave and Wenger's framework. The second type of learning-in-practice situation took the form of students as 'newcomers' to academic discourse. This involved analysing their social care work with 'old-timers' (the researchers) at weekly half-day meetings in the manner described earlier. For the rest of the week they followed the normal GSVQ curriculum.

Examples of the students' activities illustrate connections between the two forms of apprenticeship. At the beginning of the programme they gathered information about various groups in the community who might want their help. They talked to the researchers as described in the above section and they practised peer critiquing in pairs in order to reach decisions about the sort of real work they would attempt. They wrote a brief account of the discussion, outlining various types of work they had considered, saying why they had rejected some possibilities and why they preferred others. At subsequent weekly meetings, as their social care work progressed, they engaged in similar peer critiquing about judgements they were making about aspects of the work.

Another connection between the two forms of apprenticeship was a task common to both real and academic work: learning to write accounts of one's work to inform others. The researchers carried out the same initial tasks as the students, wrote about their progress, showed this to students and asked them to listen as one researcher questioned the other who had written it (i.e. peer critiquing). They asked the students to suggest how the account could be improved. They then provided copies of a second draft which incorporated improvements the researcher made as a result of the critiquing work. This activity allowed them to show the students how they could help each other by raising questions about each other's written drafts.

The types of social care work in which the students were engaging included 'befriending' disadvantaged teenagers, helping adults with learning difficulties to develop themselves, helping to run a variety of services such as advice centres for homeless people, centres for pre-fives, Reminiscence Therapy sessions and projects for helping women with substance abuse problems to seek appropriate help.

It would be inconsistent with the approach adopted to present quantitative evidence of the frequency of occurrence of certain sorts of talking and writing. Instead, we illustrate our discussion with examples of student talk from taped discussions. The examples were chosen by two research assistants after repeated reading of the transcribed tapes to find typical examples of students' attempts to understand their

practice at different stages of the programme. Our discussion seems to centre on two themes which are important to social care practitioners: knowing oneself and influences of society on people's scope for action. We believe that the examples show a growing understanding of the complexity of social care practice.

Early in the programme, students began to understand that social care practitioners are expected to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. The following examples were typical of early video-taped student talk on this theme.

J says he wants to work with 8–18 year olds and his partner asks him why. J replies:

I am an active person myself. So I would feel more comfortable with younger people, they're active themselves.

When G tells her partner she has decided not to work with the frail elderly and her partner asks for reasons, G says:

I'm an outgoing person myself, I need to express this part of myself and that might be hard with the very old and frail. I don't want to lose this part of me.

E did not want to work with clients with multi-infarct dementia because:

I feel insecure with people who don't have control of their faculties.

S reported an incident from her work with adults who had learning difficulties:

I find it difficult to keep a hold on my temper. When D (a client) sunk her teeth in my arm I nearly leathered her and was about to scream 'you're a dirty...' but I put a brake on because I really believe it's – like we said, intrinsically? – wrong to hurt her.

That's because you're not a psychopath.

What's the difference between a psychopath and other people?

When the students replay this video clip about two months later they seem to be thinking about the discussions they had with us on concepts of personality and their discussion of the same theme seems more sophisticated.

W says:

I'm not sure what J and G are saying – G seems to be saying she's a kind of extrovert, one of those traits that's supposed to shine through all the time? ... and J says he's 'active' as if that's a kind of fixed trait too. But G seems to be saying that she might get changed by the situation he's in? So, like, she doesn't really think it's a fixed trait? If it's not, maybe G shouldn't worry about losing her real self because she'll be in lots of situations outside work that'll encourage her to be outgoing.

P says:

We'd need to be born with traits like extroversion if they're supposed to be fixed? How would we know where they came from? By the time you get them measured with these tests lots of things have happened to you.

Why do people want to say that we have fixed traits?

G says:

There's theories that say it's down to the experiences we have. Do we have just one real self or several selves? How would we know?

Several months later, when the students were discussing whether any aspect of themselves had changed in the course of their work-place participation, M says:

My reference says I'm 'good at listening to and making use of advice and working well as a team player' – I've always been dead awkward – will I be able to be like the reference says when I don't have a social role where folk have expectations of me?

Do other people's signals tell us who we are?

The students seemed to become more aware that society operates in various ways which influence people's scope for action. For example:

Mothers (who are drug dependent) are judged more harshly than fathers. This makes them reluctant to come forward for help, especially the right kind of help. I know a lot of lassies who have drug problems. They don't go to their GP for help in case they're accused of neglecting their kids. There's not enough done for them because the public see drug use as self-inflicted. The public can make or break a project.

When the students take up this discussion again several months later, they seem to be understanding more subtle social influences on people's behaviour:

Why are mothers supposed to be super-human – if fathers spend the Giro on booze and drugs, they don't get slagged off the same.

Society tells them they're super-human – to persuade them to carry on bringing up the kids, with next to nothing to do it on. Somebody has to do it. So most women kind of buy the story and they struggle away with the kids.

Kind of like working in social care?

As the programme progresses, the students seem to understand the usefulness of some of the ideas we discussed with them:

Why do you want to work with the pre-five parent help project?

I've been reading about loads of projects like Stepping Stones that show parents how they can prepare their kids better for going to school, so they don't get behind the kids from the posh areas when they start school.

So kids from our area fail in school because their parents don't know how to prepare them right – and the parents in posh areas do? So, what if the parents are worried out their wits about the moneylender's heavies when you arrive on their doorstep with your bag of empty yoghurt cartons and things?

Later the students return to this discussion:

These Head Start type of programmes do seem to help – but being able to keep up OK with school work isn't the whole story is it?

Some kids don't believe it makes any difference – remember the 'lads' in Paul Willis' book? They thought the kids who worked hard at school didn't know they were being conned – like us? get a GSVQ and a £4 an hour job.

But the 'lads' didn't fathom out the whole story either – did they? – and they ended up forging their own chains.

And in another exchange:

Why does Befriending help teenagers who're getting into trouble?

Well, like in Bandura's theory, I become a kind of model.

Bandura says this will happen only if they think you're getting something out of the way you run your life.

Well, Tracy probably thinks I'm a mug – when I get the money from the Social Work Department to take her out, I get outings I couldn't afford myself.

So maybe they should persuade the chairman of British Gas to do the Befriending?

Only if they think they'll get the same rewards if they do what he does.

Maybe it's simpler – like Skinner's pigeons – Tracy turns up to go to Burger King instead of mugging old ladies, she doesn't nick anything or punch the staff, she gets what she wants – and eventually going straight becomes a pattern.

People and pigeons are similar then? And what happens when she gets fed up with the Burger King menu?

Towards the end of the course the students turn again to discussing pre-five care:

See all the things they learn at the centre – from listening to stories, singing, dancing, drawing, dressing up and all that – just after the war this famous psychologist said they shouldn't ever be separate from their mothers before they were three – that they'd get damaged for life – become criminals even – if they went young like they do now.

But surely psychologists knew even then about learning, how the more you learn the easier it gets, the sooner you start the better.

Well, Bowlby seemed to have evidence about the damage.

Evidence about ordinary kids like ours? My ma brought mine up and he's OK.

No, Bowlby researched kids brought up in awful institutions.

Surely that wasn't great evidence about the effects of separation on ordinary kids?

Maybe the government wanted to believe this evidence? What was it John told us about psychology not being value-free?

The above examples illustrate ways in which stories about the students' experiences are fused with stories we told. It is easy to see how we were able to expand upon concerns that had arisen in the students' experiences as carers on the basis of our own experiences as academics. For example, notions of fairness, justice and rights were regularly cited. We were able to tell them about Rawls' (1993) work in this connection. In turn this led on to different conceptions of liberalism and the role of carers within a liberal democratic society. We asked students to read sections of key texts and to see what relevance these might have for them. On another occasion, we introduced elements of Sartrean existentialism to explain how people seemed sometimes to act in bad faith and how the notion of a real self is problematic. This was complemented with a discussion of some of the fundamentals of psychoanalysis. We also introduced the students to other fundamental ideas in psychology and explored how some of these ideas have been used to form a legitimating ideology. Of course, as the students provided examples to try to illustrate their developing interest in some of these areas, we too began to learn more about professional care and the values of carers. We learnt more about the interplay between professional and personal roles, which in turn deepened our own understanding of these roles.



## Conclusion

It is always difficult to know whether one's perceptions of success constitute progress in a wider sense. We can however point to two indicators of success. First, the students themselves expressed satisfaction at the learning programme. They expressed enthusiasm for taking part in other activities that might help to broaden their educational interests further. Second, there is evidence in the students' log books and project reports that clients perceived some benefits in spending time with the students and apparently no unwanted outcomes. For example, a student's log book showed that the homeless people he advised were able to achieve some of the outcomes they wanted. None of the Befriending relationships broke down and students logbooks contain accounts of the teenagers', mostly positive, reactions to activities they shared with their student friends.

While we recognize the importance of caution in generalizing from one apparently successful case study, the above quotations illustrate ways in which work in college and elsewhere can feed into and enhance each other for individual educational benefits and the benefit of the community in which both kinds of work take place. They also illustrate how educational and other kinds of benefit are not easily separated. We do not want to claim that there is anything special about psychology and philosophy as practices with particular relevance to help broaden programmes of vocational education. We just happened to be able to use our expertise in these practices. We do, however, claim that it is both a good thing and possible to broaden programmes of vocational education in some way drawing on whatever expertise is available. We also claim that some practices are better than others for achieving this purpose and that generally these practices are the ones that articulate with the more fundamental ideas of serious thinkers. Philosophy and psychology do have more educational value than organized outings to theme parks, for example.

While these conclusions might appear modest, they do have important implications. It is suggested that Colleges of Further Education should cease to recruit people primarily on the basis of their supposed vocational expertise as joiners, carers or whatever. Such expertise is likely to become quickly outdated, in any case, once it is detached from actual practice. In general, we suggest that colleges should employ people on the basis of their ability to broaden students' immediate vocational interests. We can well imagine that FECs will be able to find people who have both practical expertise and an ability to induct students into critical discourse about that practice: for example, a very wide range of practices, such as theatre studies, politics and carpentry might be appropriate. The key point is that people in Further Education are not employed to prepare people for work, but to develop an educational interest beyond work. In our case study, the half day a week was all the time we could negotiate to share our psychologically and philosophically informed understandings with the students. For the most part, the remaining three and a half days a week the students attended further education college was spent covering knowledge they picked up in the workplace anyway. Similarly, those working as professional carers are likely to be better at inducting people into the practice of professional care than those who gave up such work.

While it is clear that the students' awareness of more critical questions they might ask about their workplace situation was raised, more could have been done. For example, while students seemed to have a strong conviction that certain groups in the community ought to be helped to realise their goals, they expressed equally strong discontent with the wages they would receive as trained practitioners for providing

appropriate help. Students were poor at analysing these questions, mainly, it seemed, because they lacked experience in working with ideas from politics, economics and other disciplines which might provide powerful analytical tools. There is no reason in principle why participation in several kinds of apprenticeship should not proceed serially or in parallel: social care, political studies, legal studies, theatre and many others.

It might be argued against Lave and Wenger that 'legitimate peripheral participation' in social care is just another way of cooling out working class aspirations by denying opportunities to learn forms of reasoning associated with higher income occupations. We argue that this criticism could be addressed through the pragmatic line on situated learning that we adopt. Most of our participants had not prospered in the traditional routes in formal education and had concluded college was 'not for the likes of them'. Nevertheless, the college had succeeded in getting them to risk having another chance. Of course, they hope that if they take this chance they will succeed in paid employment, but according to this case study, they want, and are receptive to, more than this. Their educational history and their choice between preparing to become social care workers and remaining unemployed is part of the larger social and political canvas with all that implies for the development of an inclusive democratic society. The extent to which lifelong learning becomes a reality for such people depends, we immodestly suggest, on whether and how formal education generally offers something along the lines that we have outlined in this paper.

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