Chapter XIX

Authentic Learning at Work

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Abstract

This chapter describes models of work-based learning and outlines key features of the authentic learning pedagogy that informs its application. It contextualises work-based learning in the political and economic imperatives driving curriculum change in universities in the Western world. In so doing, it refers to curriculum development based on generic skills and notes analyses of the role of universities in contemporary society, with particular reference to the relative importance of practical and theoretical training. Innovative case studies provide practical examples of the implementation of authentic learning pedagogies through work-based university programs. The key to successful implementation is assessment, which links theory and practice. The underlying message of the chapter is that what counts are not the teaching and learning tools you have, but the way that you use them. There can be nothing more real than real, and this is the strength of work-based university learning: it offers authentic or situated learning environments that reflect the way knowledge will be used in real life.
Introduction

Work-based learning has long been a feature of professional education in Western countries. From the beginning, the professions passed on knowledge, skills and values to apprentices. Later, some areas of learning were taken on by universities, whose teachers, as often as not, were leading professionals. Links between work and university education have persisted in professions such as law, medicine and dentistry, which require on-the-job learning prior to registration. The continuing use of work-based learning by universities may be explained by its value as a learning tool. However, like any other teaching and learning tool, work-based learning is not in itself valuable. The full potential of work-based learning is only realised by the pedagogy that informs its application. In other words, it’s not the resource you’ve got but the way that you use it that counts. This chapter describes models of implementing work-based learning and outlines key features of the authentic learning pedagogy that informs its application.

There has been an ebb and flow in the relationship between theoretical learning at universities and more practical learning at work. The outcome of this evolving relationship is that education for the professions is now inextricably linked with tertiary qualifications. Teaching and nursing provide interesting examples of the transition from training, which was at one time entirely work-based, to a model of professional education that combines theoretical, university-based elements with practical application in the workplace. Ironically, though, having distanced professional education from an apprenticeship model, universities are now adapting curricula to better suit the needs of the work force. Two key strategies have been employed to do this. One is an emphasis on generic or globally transferable skills such as written and oral communication, critical thinking, information technology skills, business acumen and teamwork. The second is the introduction of work-based learning. The two are intertwined because it is through work-based learning that students are able to demonstrate mastery of generic as well as subject-specific skills — professional knowledge. Both generic skills and work-based learning are explored in this chapter within the framework of authentic learning pedagogy.

The Significance of Work-Based Learning

In an environment in which universities compete for undergraduate students, and where university study is increasingly expensive, it is likely that the career