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Book Reviews

Work-based Learning: a blend of pedagogy and technology

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Despite the title of this book suggesting a somewhat descriptive content, it is actually underpinned by some robust research questions. It attempts to define the major challenges facing organisations and to analyse how technology-enhanced work-based learning can respond to these challenges. This is followed by an investigation into which holistic view of learning serves best to integrate key actors and processes in organisations. It then examines how a theoretical framework might guide the development of an implementation model for work-based learning, and offers considerable detail about what the elements of this model might be.

This single-authored book presents and explains what is referred to as a 'reference model for technology-enhanced work-based learning' (p.8). What appealed to me was that it is based on a framework that has been applied and evaluated in a multi-national organisation and it presents an international perspective backed up by evidence. It does this across seven chapters.

Chapter 1 outlines a series of general problems that are caused by global socio-technological changes. This is a comprehensive summary but it is rather dated now, drawing on no sources beyond 2004. This is brought into sharp focus in the section that advocates a technology-enhanced work-based learning approach. The assertion that 'technology can serve many roles to support work based learning' (p.17) certainly seems a touch simplistic in the contemporary learning context. It does, however, articulate clearly the paradigm shift to a pedagogy that acknowledges the more situational and experiential emphasis on learning that is driven more by work requirements than subject matter disciplines.

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual basis of the work-based learning approach featured in the book, with a focus on activity theory. It

locates 'technology enhanced work-based learning in a corporate context' (p.23) as an activity system, and offers a coherently argued and detailed account for doing this.

Chapter 3 makes the transition from the theoretical view by applying it within what it calls the reference model and exploring what the different components of this reference model might be. It extends and applies Merrill's First Principles of Instruction (Merrill, 2002) to the reference model. The work-based learning activity system that is constructed here has four 'instruments' (principles of learning; learning resources; learning supports; and electronic tools and environments) which are based on eleven 'principles'. This sounds complicated, and on first reading, it is. Sometimes the articulation of this transition is unwieldy and inaccessible, but the exploration of the relationship between theory and practice is well expressed and there are some really useful practical models of 'how to' presented here which will be useful to work-based learning practitioners and researchers.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of how the reference model was applied in one organisation, Shell. This is very detailed, although I would have expected issues such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility to be addressed in a learning context. The level of scrutiny, however, does make it possible for readers to draw on evidence and reflect on the transferability of the model to their own professional contexts.

Chapter 5 evaluates the impact of the model in a number of different settings within the Shell organisation. This is a close account of the monitoring and impact assessment approach with very detailed methodological explanations. It illustrates how the reference model may be used to capture and share good practice in the implementation of work-based learning programmes.

Chapter 6 focuses on the use of technology to enhance work-based learning and it describes the design, development and evaluation of a web-based, repository-type tool. This tool also contains a range of reference materials to support practitioners in designing or updating work-based courses.

The final chapter presents a reflective overview of the extent to which this study contributes to the development of both theory and practice. It asserts that it has done this by making a conceptual contribution through adding to the literature on work-based learning, through extending and applying Merrill's First Principles of Instruction and

through extending our understanding of the application of activity theory. I agree that this has been carried out successfully. It also argues that it supports the implementation of work-based learning in organisations through the provision of tools that have been informed by theory being made available to practitioners.

Moving on to more general observations, this book has been drawn from the author's PhD thesis, and it does present a rigorous and closely-argued case study. However, I did find a couple of major weaknesses with the publication.

Firstly, the book is very dense, and lacking in signposting. It does not lend itself to dipping in and out and this is reinforced by the absence of an index to guide the reader. It contains a lot of diagrams and models, but unfortunately a number of these are printed in such small font and with such lack of clarity that I could not read them. For example, on page 61, the author presents a model of the characteristics and components of a technology-enhanced, work-based learning setting which looks interesting and useful, but is too unclear for me to study closely.

Secondly, and this is inevitable given the subject matter, it has been superseded by more recent developments in technology-enhanced learning. This book is not especially helpful for those who want to learn about the range of tools available to support learning in a range of work-based contexts and needs to be used in conjunction with other resources; for example, those that can now be downloaded from <www.steeltheshowcase.org.uk>.

The book does, however, contain some useful and accessible resource material. The author states that the primary audience for this text is learning organisations and the managers and learning designers working in them. There is plenty of useful guidance and underpinning reference material here to support this audience. I think that it will also be of interest to the wider academic community involved with the design and delivery of work-based learning and, to a certain extent, technology-enhanced learning. What I liked about it particularly is that it does manage to cross over that divide between 'academic speak' and 'management speak'. This is illustrated in the discussion on page 12 which examines shifts in focus between conceptual knowledge ('know what' and 'know why') towards procedural knowledge ('know how' and 'know where'). It also provides robust and rigorous guidance on how to plan for, monitor and assess work-based learning through the very detailed exposition of the reference model and, as such, it represents an important contribution to the

development of knowledge and understanding of the challenges of work-based learning.

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Reference

MERRILL, M.D. (2003) First principles of instruction, *Educational Technology Research and Development*, vol.50, no.3, pp.43-59.