Book Reviews

Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education
ROBIN ALEXANDER (2000)
Oxford, Blackwell
642 pp.
£16.99 (paperback) £65.00 (hardback)

This book is nothing if not ambitious. Based on research and reflection on theory, policy and practice in five different countries it aims ‘to enhance our understanding of primary education and to provide insights which will enable those concerned with it … to improve the quality of young children’s learning and its relevance to the uncertain world they face’ (p. 5). The book certainly succeeds in revealing many of the complexities and nuances of a phase in education too often seen as unproblematic in terms of goals, structures and processes. It does provide very many insights that could help improve the teaching, and therefore indirectly the learning, of primary-aged children.

The book also aims ‘to develop a coherent account of pedagogy that embraces the art, science or craft of teaching, the values and ideas by which teaching is informed and its contexts of culture and history’ (pp. 5–6). It certainly succeeds in unravelling some of the relationships between pedagogic practice, educational values and the cultural context. It provides a multitude of conceptual tools for better understanding of primary pedagogy. However its aims of achieving ‘coherence’ is problematic given the elusive, multi-faceted nature of the phenomena in question and the inevitable limitations of a single scholar attempting to grapple with, and make sense of, a potentially bewildering mass of data of various kinds collected under a variety of circumstances and in ways which are not always clear to the reader.

The book is based on what the author describes as the Five Cultures project. That project involved a comparative analysis of primary education in England, France, India, Russia and the United States—an ambitious enterprise involving five very different cultural contexts and systems for primary education. Fieldwork in each country involved the collection and analysis of data at three levels: the national system (state system in the case of the United States); the school; and the classroom using a mixture of interviews, ‘semi-systematic’ observation and videotape and audiotaape. Details of data collection to enable critical appraisal of the project’s methodology and to facilitate possible replication are not given in any great detail in the book (mercifully so for the non-researcher readers of its 600-plus pages but regrettably so for others!). These data are supplemented by school and country documentation, photographs and daily journal entries. Though not disclosing the fine detail of his research methodology Robin Alexander provides an excellent, balanced discussion of some of the problems of this kind of comparative study such as the ‘typicality’ of data collected in a small number of locations within large national or state education systems; the difficulties of working through the conceptual schemes of interpreters; and the problems involved in recording, translating, transcribing and analysing classroom discourse.

He boldly, imaginatively and insightfully enters where only a few comparative educationists have dared to tread—in his words ‘the most important part of the educational terrain, the practice of teaching and learning, and what is possibly the most elusive theme of all, how such practice relates to the context of culture, structure and policy in which it is embedded’ (p. 3). Armed with a battery of conceptual tools acquired from an incredibly extensive range of reading he ‘maps’ out the features of the ‘terrain’ on a variety of scales, provides new perspectives to enable those working within particular systems to see them afresh, gives fascinating views for ‘outsiders’ into the working (and sometimes even the sensory environment) of ‘other’ systems and also introduces new tools of his own to analyse pedagogical phenomena such as lesson structure and form, learning tasks, assessment, monitoring, pace and classroom discourse. The end result is a series of valuable analyses rich in possible impli-
cations for primary policy, theory and practice in a wide variety of countries far beyond those featured in the book itself.

The book is beautifully written. Its language is as clear and precise as the nature of the phenomena under scrutiny allow. There are a multitude of memorable phrases which capture the essence of the issues under discussion. Despite its appropriately serious tone and intent occasional glimpses of mischievousness are evident. For me the gem is the reference to the ‘ubiquitous escaping of pedagogical steam—“Shh … shh” A linguistic anthropologist might be able to make something of the fact that we heard “Shh” in four out of the five countries and that sound and intent were identical in French, English English, American English and Russian.’ Alexander mischievously concludes ‘So there are some universals in teaching, then.’

The book is a fascinating read even without its many arresting phrases. There are, however, two irritating features. The first is the author’s vendetta against the former Chief Inspector of Schools in England. What begins as an interesting aside to the main issues of the book rapidly becomes distracting as every opportunity is taken to castigate the former inspector in what many readers will feel is a private score to settle. The second is the author’s determination to quote or reference his own writing at almost every opportunity—conveying the impression of a near-monopoly contribution to policy-makers in English primary education during the early part of the 1990s. Even his own colleagues at Warwick University who did make a major contribution to policy-analysis related to English primary education are hardly mentioned.

Robin Alexander implies that the book will ‘apply the lessons of comparative analysis to the structure and future of primary education in England’. This promise is not really fulfilled. In the final analysis only one major implication—concerned with the importance of public structured talk in advancing the propositional, conceptual and discursive knowledge of pupils—is explored in any detail, and what a fascinating explanation it is! The reader is left wanting equally insightful exploration of further issues even to the extent of reading another hundred pages to the 600 already completed! What accounts for the sudden end to the book and the short-fall in terms of the application of his analyses? Perhaps an academic ‘universal’ to parallel the teaching universal mentioned above—the pressure to publish in the light of the imminent British Research Assessment Exercise!

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Numeracy and Beyond
MARTIN HUGHES, CHARLES DESFORGES & CHRISTINE MITCHELL with CLIVE CARRÈ (2000) Buckingham, Open University Press. 136 pp
£14.99 (paperback) £45.00 (hardback)

Numeracy and Beyond is an eminently accessible book and would be of interest to anyone concerned with mathematics teaching in the primary phase. Its central focus is the application of mathematical knowledge and, grounded in a historical account of the construction of ‘using and applying mathematical knowledge’ in the curriculum and the classroom, it draws on examples of pedagogic tasks and strategies developed by a group of primary school teachers. A theoretical theme relating to the nature of knowledge and its acquisition is also developed throughout the book and used to draw tentative links between the epistemologies underpinning various curriculum models and teachers’ approaches to application and theories of learning.

The authors begin by establishing the proposition that application in mathematics is an intractable ‘problem’. In a brief résumé of the complexities of applying mathematical knowledge acquired in one situation to problems in another, examples are drawn from both school and ‘real life’ contexts. The latter includes the now renowned young Brazilian street traders’ impressive ability in their commercial transactions in comparison to their performance of the same arithmetic operations using formal paper and pencil methods. Theoretical conceptualisations of knowledge acquisition and transfer are drawn from associationism, constructivism and situated cognition. The version of constructivism offered is closely centred on the work of Piaget and doesn’t cite the radical (e.g. Von Glasersfeld, 1995) or social constructivist (e.g. Ernest, 1991) positions popular in mathematics education over the past 20 years; indeed, the relatively limited literature base is perhaps an issue in the book as a whole. Lave’s (1988) social anthropology of
cognition in practice and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning would, for example, have been valuable further resources for readers.

Chapter 2 traces the history of curriculum reform in the UK with particular reference to the ‘using and applying’ of mathematics. The review moves at a pace from the Cockcroft Report of the early 1980s in the UK through the various formulations of the English National Curriculum (NC). The latter positioned ‘using and applying’ as a separate attainment target (AT1) and the authors note, in particular, the degree to which pupils’ success in demonstrating achievement depended upon teachers’ skills in devising appropriate tasks. In a useful review of the work of King’s College, London in researching teachers’ interpretation of ‘using and applying’ a wide gulf was revealed between their understanding and official intentions and meanings. Teachers were found to focus upon the ‘relevant’ and ‘practical’ criteria in selecting tasks and there was little evidence that they specifically addressed the teaching of the mathematical processes embedded in AT1 (justify, prove, generalise, etc.) What the NC did not, by general consensus (Galton, 1995), achieve was the government’s ambition to change primary school teachers’ pedagogic practice. This aim was addressed more directly by the National Numeracy Strategy (NNS). In NNS the UK government, dissatisfied by England’s profile in the burgeoning national/international audit culture, sought to prescribe the content and pedagogy of primary school mathematics. The NNS integrated ‘using and applying’ across ‘problem solving’ and the other four strands of the Numeracy Framework. But from an analysis of key objectives the authors characterise the NNS as a model which privileges proficiency in calculation and does not problematise application or stress process. In this respect the NNS approach is argued to be more in line with ‘associationist’ learning principles and the NC ‘using and applying’ model is tentatively portrayed as a more ‘situated’ approach akin to apprenticeship (see Hughes, 1999, for a more detailed ‘open dialogue’ with members of the mathematics education community on these issues).

The next three chapters of the book present case studies derived from the Nuffield-funded ‘using and applying mathematical knowledge in primary schools’ project. The first chapter reports on investigations identified by project teachers as either particularly ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’; the other two chapters offer examples of Key Stage 1 (K–2) and 2 (3–6) teachers, respectively, developing their practice with regard to activities focused upon ‘teaching for application’. Together the chapters present a rich and varied selection of mathematical activities (e.g., composing number stories, games, investigations, mathematical discussions, group work and authentic ‘school-based’ problem solving) that can be raided for ideas and insights. Key questions addressed by the authors in the commentary relate to: the nature of the activity; how it is intended to promote application; the teachers’ theory of application; what the teacher does to promote application; and finally, the opportunities the activity presents for developing process skills. Although the case studies presented are not characterised as ‘best practice’ the project teachers themselves were considered ‘excellent practitioners’ and thus not directly comparable to the cohorts studied in the Askew et al. (1993) evaluation of the NC. Nevertheless, useful parallels are drawn between how, like the teachers in the NC evaluation sample, these teachers chose tasks that were ‘practical’ and ‘relevant’; and a number stressed the importance of ‘authentic’—‘real life’ (e.g., designing shelving for the classroom)—tasks that were meaningful and motivating for pupils. Yet, unlike the evaluation sample, they devised tasks that involved process skills and were able to conceptualise and discuss the application of mathematical content and processes necessitated in the activities. An international dimension is introduced in the penultimate chapter as comparisons are drawn with Japan, where mathematics teachers do not see application as a ‘problem’ (although not all educators share their confidence). Japanese pupils, the authors argue, acquire their facility in application implicitly through pedagogic strategies, rather than explicitly through teaching.

Tensions will always exist between ‘real life’ and ‘classroom practice’ and the use of a specific context, or hypothetical setting, in which to embed a mathematical task is fraught with complexity, as I know to my cost (McNamara, 1993). Yet guiding students ‘beyond’ numeracy into its application must surely be one of the central aims of mathematics teachers and this book’s great strength, and main concern, is the problematising of both the concept of teaching for application and the mathematical tasks and activities presented.
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The Social World of Pupil Assessment: Processes and Contexts of Primary Schooling
ANN FILER & ANDREW POLLARD (2000) London, Continuum
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Two important concerns have been voiced about educational research in recent debates: firstly, the scarcity of cumulative studies building on earlier work; and secondly, the dearth of longitudinal studies of teaching and learning, and the impact of classroom processes on pupils’ achievement. Along with its earlier companion volumes The Social World of Pupil Learning and The Social World of Pupil Career, this book does much to rebut those criticisms. The research reported in the three books began in 1987/88, and is still continuing. During that time, the authors have tracked the learning experiences and developing identity of pupils in two schools in different parts of the same English city. The pupils began their school careers in the reception classes of the primary schools in 1987 and 1988. This research is important in its own right; but it is doubly important because it focuses on the pupils who entered school in the same year as the English Education Reform Act. They are, thus, the first generation of pupils to have experienced only the national curriculum and its regime of assessment and testing.

As the authors point out, assessment became one of the dominant issues in education in the late 1980s and 1990s. One of the reasons it gained such prominence was the apparent provision of ‘hard evidence’ upon which the performance of pupils and schools could be judged and compared, and policies and practices evaluated. Assessment data also served an important function as the currency of the quasi-marketplace of education, created by successive British governments in the 1990s, in which parents were regarded as the consumers or clients. However, underpinning such confidence in assessment practices is a belief that they are sufficiently objective, reliable and impartial to be used for those purposes. Filer and Pollard question this belief by asking whether it is well founded; and examining the extent to which routine assessment evidence can be treated as factual and categorical. The researchers do not assume that assessment is a neutral, value-free technology; they regard it as a collection of social and cultural practices embedded in time and place and embedded by particular people in institutional roles. Furthermore, they examine how formal and informal assessment events contribute to pupils’ identity as learners, and how assessment fulfills a range of political and social functions within modern societies.

One of the many strengths of The Social World of Pupil Assessment, as with the preceding volumes, is that its informing concepts and theories are presented in a clear and accessible way, which avoids over-simplification. Filer and Pollard also achieve the notoriously difficult act of combining theoretically sophisticated analysis with the presentation of empirical data—in this case from the lived experience of pupils, teachers and schools involved in assessment policies and procedures.

The book is in two sections. The first deals with the conceptual framework and the overall context of the research study; and the relationship between this volume and the two earlier ones. The first section outlines the research design and provides details of the school teachers studied. Whilst explicitly locating their work within the symbolic interactionist tradition, the
authors also highlight limitations of the micro-level focus implied by symbolic interactionism. They identify how their analysis was also informed by other theoretical perspectives, such as Vygotskyan socio-cultural theories of learning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), and Bernstein’s work on pedagogic codes (e.g., 1990, 1996). It is no small achievement to engage with the meanings that individuals attribute to events and interactions, whilst also maintaining an analytic focus on the structural and material factors which shape the lives of individual pupils, families, teachers, schools and local communities. Filer and Pollard (pp. 4–5) argue that:

... any satisfactory account of ‘identity’ has to synthesise the internal and personal concerns of individuals with the external influences and mediations of culture, and ... has to consider the differential distribution of material, social and linguistic resources which give rise to socio-economic and cultural circumstances that position expectations of, and for, particular groups and communities.

The second part of the book is structured around five questions central to the research study. These are: who is being assessed; who is assessing; what is being assessed; how does assessment function in classrooms; and how are assessments interpreted and mediated? Each of the questions is dealt with in two chapters: one that discusses the wider issues and a second that presents empirical data from the study. Overall, this way of organising the material works well, and a coherent connection is maintained between the micro and macro levels of analysis. Whilst clearly focusing on pupils’ experience and identity, the authors also examine the teacher’s perspective. They highlight the dilemmas and contradictions often experienced by teachers in classrooms; and also the strategies they develop to cope with competing demands. Filer and Pollard question what exactly is meant when teachers and schools talk of knowing and assessing the whole child. They observe that the greater the problem a child has in meeting the social and academic expectations of the school, then the greater the degree to which pupils’ physical, emotional and socio-cultural identity will be considered legitimate areas of enquiry (p. 69).

The final section of the book addresses the question of how assessment is mediated and interpreted. Filer and Pollard point out that assessment is not a one-way process: teachers, parents and pupils are all involved in making judgements about, mediating and interpreting the official and unofficial voices of school, assessment (pp. 129–130).

Responses to school assessment practices and outcomes were therefore shaped in the contexts of family culture, relationships and experiences, as well as in the context of local socio-economic and cultural interpretations and expectations. In addition to assessing their children, parents also evaluated teacher and school assessment practices.

Through sensitive analysis of data, the authors identify how both formal and informal assessment practices contribute to establishing and maintaining pupils’ identities. In one classroom some children’s identity is bound up with ‘getting on’ and ‘getting ahead’. Although this sort of competition may be perceived as natural and beneficial by some pupils, teachers and parents, it has much less desirable consequences for those pupils who do not perform well in highly public measurements of progress. Inability to compete successfully with other children—even in Year 2 of primary school—is seen by one child as failure. He explains to the researcher (p. 107) how a move from Year 1 to 2 has meant a return to a ‘number one’ exercise book yet again, whereas other children in the class are onto their fourth, or even eighth book. When asked by the interviewer how he felt about this, his response is both poignant and disturbing:

Int: How do you feel about that?

Christopher: Nasty and angry. Peter is on number four and I feel angry with him.

It is a very sad reflection on our educational priorities that children should feel angry and frustrated by their inability to compete in the assessment stakes at the age of six or seven. The comment illuminates the less desirable consequences of the current obsession with performance outcomes in education. As this research progresses, it will be interesting to read how Christopher and others like him have fared.
throughout primary and secondary school. One has the feeling that they will not be the winners in the testing regime, and an educational marketplace in which assessment serves as currency.

This is a book that should be read by all beginning and experienced teachers, as well as by educational researchers interested in teaching and learning. As a text it is accessible and highly readable, whilst also offering detailed and theoretically sophisticated analysis. For novice and expert teachers, it certainly offers an excellent counter-balance to the generalities of performance statements and competences relating to knowledge and understanding of assessment.

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Essays on Citizenship

BERNARD CRICK (2000)

London, Continuum

210 pp.

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England has come late to making the teaching of citizenship compulsory. As secondary schools prepare themselves for this and primary schools ponder their new national guidance for PSHE and Citizenship, a timely collection of Essays on Citizenship has been published, written by Bernard Crick; the influential ‘guru’ of David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education. This collection is not a guide or resource book for the practical delivery of Citizenship, but essays and addresses from 1969–1978 and from 1992–2000 which demonstrate the evolution of Crick’s thinking over those times. The most recent essays, indeed, are personal reflections arising from David Blunkett’s advisory committee on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools which Crick chaired for the QCA in 1998. The resulting Report strongly influenced the statutory document that followed.

There are some alterations of the earlier papers but largely Crick leaves them as they were, including the gendered language for which he apologises, but leaves intact as illustration of how political thinking has evolved. Similarly, he elucidates how the very concept of citizenship in education has changed in his mind over the three decades from the narrower connotation of political education and literacy which he and others advocated in the 1970s. ‘Citizenship’, he says, ‘conveys better … the ancient tradition, long before the democratic era, of active, participative inhabitants of a state exercising both rights and duties for the common good, whether in official or voluntary public arenas.’

In the 1970s, Crick argued that it was no use dulling pupils minds with endless details about political rules and a ‘constitution’ which did not actually exist. They should learn rather the real politics which naturally occur in civic society where there will always be conflicts of interests and ideals. Pupils, he said, need to understand that different people hold different views and why they do. They should work out for themselves what they wanted and did not want from the State. They should learn to read newspapers critically and how to recognise both deliberate and simple everyday bias. Politics were, he pronounced, the recognition and toleration of diversity so political and civic education had to be so too. This was not to encourage ‘anything goes’ but to awaken the young to the working and beliefs underpinning the present system—a realisation only possible through current affairs and contemporary history. Without understanding the real issues and differing values and policies of everyday life, youngsters were likely to become both disillusioned and/or indifferent to the forces that governed them.

By the 1990s, however, Crick became convinced that the earlier pleas for political education and literacy from himself and others (including Kenneth Baker), although unsuccessful, had not in fact gone far enough. He now preferred the concept of ‘true citizenship, the idea of individuals interacting for public pur-
poses in a civic community; ... the existence and exercise of civil liberties by free people.' Pointing out that historically there had been two main ideas of civil liberties—the ‘liberal’ one of legal framework to protect the individual against the State and the republican one whereby citizens can positively influence affairs of State, he elected for the latter. Bemoaning the fact that in Britain, unlike France or the USA, ‘the qualifying adjective for citizen has less often been “active” than “good”’, he urged a stress on ‘community activity’ should be part of a new subject called ‘citizenship’. Frightened alike by Margaret Thatcher’s sudden upholding of an atomistic view of citizenship and by the divorce between the high standards of academic political philosophy and the low standards of public debate, Crick came to urge the teaching of an interactive, experiential ‘citizenship’ as vital, aiming no less than at ‘a change in the political culture of this country’ where people will ‘think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with ... critical capacities ...’. Pupils should understand civil liberties and human rights and the historical difference between them and know that ‘[P]olitical activity by citizens is the very essence of a free society’.

Effective education for citizenship as in the 1998 Report therefore means three interrelated things: that children will learn from the time they start school ‘socially responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom’; that they will learn about and become ‘helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their school and their local communities’; and, lastly, that they will learn how to become ‘effective in public life through knowledge, skills and specific values’. Crick is sure that such teaching should begin in the primary school as children early form ‘concepts of fairness’ and attitudes to rules, authority, their local environment and social responsibility. Anxious that the new subject should persuade and arouse thought rather than antagonise, he supports the Order’s light touch and the way it is based on ‘learning outcomes’ rather than precise prescriptions. For example, indirect teaching of rights, different identities and the need for mutual respect, is counselled rather than overt anti-racism.

What use is this, therefore, to teachers? Faced with many government directives and an already overcrowded curriculum, many of them might long for the precision whose absence Crick applauds. For practical help they will have to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, all concerned that the Citizenship Order will be thoughtfully and sympathetically implemented, would do well to consider the arguments which are so clearly and cogently put forward here. Crick is pleading for that active, conceptual and skills approach to teaching and learning which has underpinned various educational reforms in England since the TVEI initiative in the 1980s. He is asking for cross-curricular planning that will engage not only the new subject and PSHE but also the humanities, particularly history since he is so aware that all politics, including awareness of human rights, must be understood in historical context. Since all societies are ‘complex and inherently pluralistic’ he urges that it is better to conciliate opposing differences than to coerce, oppress or destroy without consent—better, in short, to be governed ‘politically’ and to share in that process. To Crick this was the ancient Greek ideal, summed up by Pericles’ speech as rendered by Thucydides: ‘we do not say that a man [sic] who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.’

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Working Knowledge: the new vocationalism and higher education
COLIN SYMES & JOHN McINTYRE (Eds)
Buckingham, SRHE/Open University Press 208 pp.
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The authors in this collection focus, in very different ways, upon the place of paid employment as a central location for learning in or through higher education. In a post-modern (or at least post-Fordist) and globalised world, universities, the argument goes, can no longer stand aloof from the needs of employers and employment. They are caught up in a contested but growing ‘instrumental progressivism’ (p. 2), the purest embodiment of which is what the authors term work-based learning, where work and the workplace become the curriculum (in the widest sense) for higher educational students.

As this notion of work-based learning is
central to several of the chapters, and implicitly to the volume as a whole, it bears a little more exploration. It is claimed, for example by Boud and Symes, that work-based learning differs from its forerunners, where work experience was part of a wider university program of study, either as sandwich-type provision, or as a site for the completion of university-based assignments. In true work-based learning, the needs of work and workplace are central, and individual curricula are negotiated between the student, the work supervisor and the university tutor. The connection with progressivism is through this student-centred negotiation. The label ‘instrumental’ is added, because the purpose of work-based learning is to achieve an outcome relevant to the place of work—for example, through solving a work-related problem.

Work-based learning is located within a broader social, economic and political movement, that most contributors see as steadily transforming the work of universities and their relationship to the rest of the world. Many cite Gibbons et al. (1994), and their argument that traditional university knowledge (Mode 1) is being paralleled and displaced by social knowledge (Mode 2). This is, in turn, part of wider globalising changes to the nature of employment and social organisation. Universities are in crisis, because they do not know how to react to these cumulative changes.

Though I believe this to be an accurate summary of the main message in this book, it does symbolic violence to the complexity and subtlety of the argument. The volume contains 11 chapters, many of them co-authored. All the authors are experts in this field, and most come from a leading centre for the study of work-based learning and working knowledge, the University of Technology, Sydney. The result is a rich inter-weaving of carefully articulated critical stances, related (closely or otherwise) to the central thesis. It is impossible, in a short review, to do justice to the quality and variety of all these perspectives. Authors differ in their dispositions towards the issues at stake, using different but overlapping theoretical traditions, and focusing on different aspects.

The result is a strong coverage of the territory set out in the title, in ways that many working in the field will find valuable. Despite the obvious enthusiasm of some of the authors for work-based learning and for instrumental vocationalism, this is far from a ‘gung ho’ proselytisation. Between them, the authors identify a vast array of problematic issues, often in novel and perceptive ways.

One theme that struck home with me was the explicit rejection, by several authors, of over-simplified binary distinctions. For example, Usher took Gibbons et al. to task, for exaggerating the differences between Mode 1 and Mode 2 learning, and for over-claiming about the novelty of Mode 2. Hager, in a significant discussion of the nature of knowledge, similarly dismissed the distinction by Barnett (1997) between academic operational competence. He argued that it was possible to see knowledge as integrating aspects of both, if they were differently configured, through a more holistic view of knowledge as judgement. On the way, his convincing critique of Cartesianism in educational thinking and practices, whereby mind and body are erroneously regarded as separate, with mind superior, has very wide implications indeed.

In a different way, Symes’s analysis of four different discourses that can be traced in debates about vocationalism and liberal education, was one of the best summaries of a complex literature that I have read, though he could, perhaps, have found space to include the more radical conceptions of learning as a means of empowerment through communal activity. This leads to an interesting aside. In the whole book, I found no reference to the role of Trades Unions in work-based learning. Another valuable contribution was Beckett’s attack on simplistic notions of the virtual university, arguing, convincingly for me, that such approaches entail a disembodiment of learning: a paradoxical return to the Cartesianism that Hager associated with traditional academic education.

Because of length, I wish to pull back from further critiques of individual chapters, and confine my comments to the collection as a whole. I have some reservations about the overall message. For there seems to be a broad assumption, in many of the contributions, that learning at or through work is inherently superior to other forms of academic learning. The workplace is richer as a site for learning, learning at work is inherently embodied, and so on. At times, it almost seemed as if all university learning should be/will have to become work-based. I have three major reservations with this, and must immediately acknowledge that all are clearly voiced, as
sub-issues, within some chapters in the book. The first is that universities are also places of work—every bit as real, varied and rich as any other workplace, and rather more so than many. Learning physics, say, or French, or cultural studies, entails becoming a member of an academic community of practice. It can be exciting, embodied and, in Hager’s terms, centred upon a series of judgements. There may indeed be problems relating what is learned in a different world of paid employment once the degree has been completed, but that does not mean that the learning was any less effective or valued.

Second, work-based learning is for paid workers. As Symes points out, ‘the vocationalised university only has any significance for the third tier of the labour force [those in full-time employment] who form an ever diminishing percentage of the population’ (pp. 41–42). It has very little to do, per se, with the education of either students studying full-time prior to seeking employment, or for many people who are unemployed, at least in the sense of not having regular paid employment. Yet the former, rightly or not, remain the bread and butter of most higher education provision, and the latter point raises fundamental issues about the purpose of university education, and access to it. For example, as many teacher educators already know, learning from work, even in the more traditional sense of a practicum, crucially depends upon the quality, for student learning, of the school or department where a student is placed. Boud and Symes acknowledge that the ‘university needs … to ensure that work-based learning takes place in workplaces suitable for learning’ (p. 22). How do we do this, without excluding many students who work in places judged unsuitable, or with no access to any workplace?

Third, as Garrick and Clegg point out, through a graphic if rather over-worked metaphor of employer as vampire, the workplace is sometimes antagonistic to workers’ wants and needs. Yet, in the pure work-based learning model, the learner has to negotiate with two more powerful ‘partners’: the university tutor and the work supervisor. Often this will present no problem, but it would be naïve to assume that there will not be cases of conflict, as well as of the more subtle surveillance through a Foucaultian-style disciplining of the self, that several contributors note.

For these reasons, not to mention the continuing power and influence of the major traditional universities and their alumni, it seems to me that work-based learning, as defined here, is likely to remain a valuable but marginal part of higher education provision. Indeed, arguably it should. For, adopting a left-of-centre position, for example advocating wider participation and the importance of greater educational equality, work-based learning is not enough. We need to develop university-based learning that, to quote the well-known advert, ‘gets to the parts other university education does not reach’. This includes those for whom employment is every bit as much a source of oppression as are the elitist hierarchies of traditional university provision. As many of the contributors to this book suggest, this may be becoming more difficult, in a world where performativity and measured outcomes that are valued by those who pay increasingly dominate our lives. But that does not mean that we shouldn’t try.

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