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Working the Knowledge Game? Universities and Corporate Organizations in Partnership

Abstract *As a result of changing conditions of funding, emanating in a sense of crisis about viability and the need to find new sources of revenue, many universities in Australia and elsewhere are moving into new areas of application in novel partnerships with corporate organizations, to deliver ‘work-based learning’. But what may promise to resolve a fiscal crisis sometimes can generate practices which prove deeply unsettling for the context in which they are embedded. In this article we explore the extent to which new modes of work-based learning represent a legitimization crisis for universities as well as exploring their implications for the corporate partners. Data from an ongoing study of such a partnership between the ABC Co, a global financial industry firm, and a large university dedicated to forging practice-based relationships with industry, are drawn on. The conclusions that we reach suggest that the reality of the new knowledge age of work-based learning is, perhaps, rather more a question of impression management, jointly negotiated on both sides, than a brave new world. **Key Words:** change; corporate learning; knowledge management; learning partnerships; power; universities; work-based learning*

The focus of this article is the concept of Work-based Learning (WBL) as a learning partnership between a university and corporate organizations. In WBL the fundamental assumption that is made is that people typically know more than is admitted by the credentials that they might have won in the past. In demanding knowledge-based occupations, new capabilities not reflected in past credentials are established which a university could count towards more current credentials. Hence, credit will be given for a carefully documented portfolio that establishes work-based learning gained from work experiences. The need for universities, corporations and organizations to leverage their ‘knowledge assets in order to gain competitive advantage’ (Carter and Scarbrough, 2001: 216) provides the context within which WBL partnerships have emerged, developed and, in some cases, died.

For universities, hard-pressed financially to maintain their traditional approaches to learning in a new system of mass provision of higher education, WBL partnerships represent a means of entering new untapped markets to earn additional revenue. Thus, for universities, WBL has a resource-based appeal—at least in principle.

For the corporate organizations involved as industry partners with the university, there is a realization that competition in the marketplace is not only based on accumulating economic capital but also occurs in ‘a discursive space’ in which ‘symbolic capital is just as important’ (Tsoukas, 1999: 499–506). WBL offers an opportunity to effect an accommodation between employees gaining knowledge and the organization’s commercial interests. WBL ‘attempts to bring knowledge “under control” and thus make people “more manageable”’ (Rhodes and Garrick, 2002: 87) in that what they learn is closely related to what they are supposed to do at work.

What about the individual learners: what do programs such as WBL do for them? Essentially, they assign credit for workplace knowledge and seek to align work tasks and projects with university learning tasks and projects. Learning strategies such as the assignment of workplace mentors and constructivist learning programs focus on a ‘technology of the self’ rather than on canons pertaining to necessary content. The underlying idea is that people who are involved in WBL will be better able to contribute to the success of the organization. They will be learning and gaining a credential for themselves but they will be doing so in corporately approved as well as university approved ways.

Everyone appears to be a winner from WBL: the student, the university, and the corporate organization. Such an assumption is based on the premise that the goals of each stakeholder are congruent, which, as we will argue, is not always the case. Also, it assumes that authority is seamless: that once a strategy has been declared, it is a simple matter to implement it through the ranks. The ranks, as we shall see, are recalcitrant on both sides.

The research reported in the article is drawn from a longitudinal study of a work-based learning program as it was experienced at an institutional and an individual level by the key stakeholders in the partnership: the university and the corporate organization, as well as the students, their managers and academic advisers. First, we examine the context of change in relation to shifting concepts and discourses of what constitutes knowledge from the perspectives of universities, corporate organizations and the individual employee. Second, we go on to explain the WBL program in practice. Finally, within the context of our study of the WBL program, we re-examine each of the stakeholders in turn, focusing on the tensions and synergies which such ‘new’ ways of learning constitute for each party.

The University

Universities in Australia, together with many of their counterparts in other OECD nations, are in ‘fiscal crisis’ (O’Connor, 1972). Traced to the early 1970s, the crisis is attributed to radical shifts in government policy and reduction in funding; the transition to a mass education system; changes in disciplinary knowledge; and a declining academic freedom (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Tight, 1988). Such a

crisis, centred on increasing reluctance to fund universities as a public good, may seem paradoxical since we are supposed to be in an 'age of learning' (Jarvis, 1992). Interestingly, the fiscal crisis does not seem to have led to what Habermas (1976) termed a legitimation crisis, manifest in a sense of profound questioning and uncertainty about the nature of the knowledge that is being legitimated.¹ Instead, according to proponents of the knowledge-based economy (Castells, 1993; Drucker, 1992), there is growing acceptance of the economic value of knowledge as a source of discontinuous innovation and competitive advantage. The value of knowledge is seen to reside in its utility rather than in any innate quality, giving rise to a utilitarian view of knowledge.

The current conception of utility depends on different criteria from the traditional peer review processes. It is linked to and dependent on the dispersion of knowledge within the economy and society rather than its specialized consolidation within highly specific institutions such as universities. Shifts in knowledge are occurring but they are not so much producing a legitimation crisis as repositioning various 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1983: 208) that measure the higher education population against the demands of the labour market (Symes, 2001: 204), partially within the institutions of paid employment, partly in the academy, yet outside the professions that have long had this dividing role in relation to labour markets. There are a number of tensions associated with the boundary spanning that this positioning entails.

Recent accounts of the academic workplace as a knowledge space capture these tensions as manifest in a range of different 'boundary activities'. One such 'boundary activity' is presented in the knowledge schema proposed by Gibbons et al. (1994). Widely cited in OECD reports, government policy and the academic literature as a way forward in understanding the 'new production of knowledge' (*British Journal of Management*, 2001; OECD, 1996), the knowledge schema proposed by Gibbons and his colleagues makes the distinction between mode one and mode two knowledge. Mode one knowledge is defined as being 'set within a disciplinary framework' and 'institutionalized primarily within university structures', whereas mode two knowledge is characterized as operating 'within a context of application'—it is 'transdisciplinary' and 'carried out in non-hierarchical, heterogeneously organized forms which are essentially transient'. Workplace knowledge can be presented as mode two, a 'new' form of knowledge.

The emphasis on mode two knowledge as 'new' suggests that the institution of the university is no longer regarded as having as tight a monopoly over what counts as knowledge as it once had. What is 'new' is that the academy now legitimizes non-credentialed forms of knowledge, whereas previously it had marginalized and discounted it. Equally, what has been 'lost' is not the monopoly of knowledge held by the university—which they never had, as the example of the professions indicates—but rather it is the loss of the monopoly over the credentialing of knowledge.

In making sense of Gibbons and his colleagues' work as a 'boundary activity' we are reminded of Bauman's metaphors of the 'Interpreter' and 'Legislator' (Bauman, 1987). Some time before Gibbons and his colleagues hit on the changing conceptions and parameters of knowledge and came up with the mode one and mode two labels, Bauman had explained differences in the strategy of intellectual work in postmodernity compared with that in modernity (Bauman,

1987: 4–6). Moderns thought that they could legislate on what knowledge should be constituted as being; postmoderns know that the only point is interpreting the world, and making any interpretation canonical is deeply problematic. Where Gibbons and his colleagues connect with Bauman is that they are oriented towards the social reality that the postmodern ‘interpreter’ role is now the established fact. It describes how a great deal of knowledge from outside the academy is disseminated and understood. And, as Bauman acknowledges, academics might not like this plurality but they are relatively powerless to stop it happening.

A consequence of these shifts in knowledge being characterized as mode one and mode two is that knowledge remains labelled with clear institutional boundaries—knowledge from ‘inside’ the academy being mode one while that generated in practice ‘outside’ the academy is mode two. Part of the process of labelling the two types of knowledge as modes is that it legitimizes the idea of there being knowledge of the workplace within the academy. The creation of new academic language replaces the colloquial (and pejorative) labels of ‘practical know-how’, ‘business savvy’ or ‘craft’. Moreover, ‘mode two knowledge’ is able to be hitched, in a classic mode one way, to the ‘rediscovery’ of Polanyi’s work on ‘tacit’ and ‘explicit’ knowledge (1967), and a new interest in ‘experiential’, ‘situated’ and ‘informal’ knowledge. Fuller suggests that the 20th century is marked by the academy turning ‘ever larger portions of everyday life into intellectual real estate to which academic disciplines hold the deeds’ (Fuller, 2002: 38). The mode-making exercise could hardly be a clearer case in point: once identified and labelled, the chance is that the newly discovered mode can be domesticated and brought into the fold. Increasingly, academic strategies, especially in a hybrid field such as management, seem less confident that they will keep ‘the deeds’ to the ‘intellectual real estate’, as Fuller puts it, through reciting the classical mode one arguments for scientific, neutral, value-free knowledge that is true and singularly real. And those traditional management scholars who do would seem singularly unfit to play the role of ‘interpreter’ in Bauman’s terms.

In such a context it is not surprising that, in an effort to retain and extend real estate entitlements, in Fuller’s terms, university management schools have not been slow in seeking to develop more interpretive, dare we even say, more postmodern, approaches to the knowledge that they credential. They have developed ways of seeking to incorporate the knowledge generated in the mode two world as an input into their mode one world, so that they can continue to practise mode one ways while, arguably, contributing to mode two knowledge. To do this, universities, such as the one reported later in this article, have established work-based learning units precisely to broker recognition of mode two-type learning.

Working with Knowledge in University Fields

A modern management professor and work-based learning manager necessarily move frequently in corporate as well as academic circles. In these circles we are often exposed to the nagging suspicion of a questioning of the status and utility of universities. A question that is repeatedly posed is ‘What is the university brand worth?’ The posing of the question, often stated defiantly, if not disparagingly, by

actors from industry, is a form of symbolic violence: although some elements of reality may be part of their taken-for-granted landscape (which is one of commerce) other elements are not 'natural' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), they are 'cracked, dully jarring or disfunctioning' (Foucault, 1980: 52). One such signifier now seems to be 'university'. While commerce is innovative and useful for the national purpose—it strives to make profits—it seems that universities are regarded as repositories of largely scholarly and thus not innovative knowledge, whose use value is often questioned. When one is acting as an emissary of the denigrated institution and seeking to broker deals in which there is some clear value proposition to be enjoyed by innovative masters of business from commercial organizations, these questions are quite confronting. They put one on the spot. One has to be able to say why what the university has to offer matters.

The scripts used presume that, on the part of corporate organizations, 'what is at stake' in forming a partnership with a university is to gain cultural or symbolic capital for the dual purpose of generating prestige and further financial capital. In this sense knowing what the 'brand' is worth is a measurement of this capital and therefore a legitimate part of the negotiation process. Indeed, it is a measurement that both university and industry actors know can be weighed up against that of other players in the 'knowledge game', including other tertiary institutions, consulting companies, government agencies, and professional bodies. On the part of the university, their reasons for complicity in this exchange centre primarily not only on monetary capital but also on the accrual of new cultural and symbolic capital. Forming partnerships with industry has become the 'new' mantra of the academy as well as that of the government—which remains the universities' major funding source. Partnerships with industry represent not only a strategy to carve out new markets but also a way of gaining the approval of the government to secure continued funding. Such partnerships are best achieved by proving that as actors and as an institution they are not only 'in' but also 'of' the 'real world'. The dispensers and enforcers of the new rules and regulations of the 'real world' are the senior executives of tertiary institutions, shaping a growing senior management cadre within the tertiary education sector.

In Australia, the imperatives of government policies and the broader thrust of OECD reports are strongly reflected in strategic policies. Commenting on the changing relationship between the Australian Federal Government and universities in Australia, Clegg (1989: 228) noted that: 'If agencies already within a field choose to remain within that field in the future, then they have to comply with the rules that the government propounded' as funds are allocated on the 'congruence' of university profiles to 'government priorities'. The tools of control used by senior executives in the tertiary field to construct such profiles are borrowed from the business world of accountability, quality assurance, performance agreements and audits. Such tools of control have come to be called 'disciplinary practices' (Foucault, 1977). As Clegg comments (1989: 191) they are 'meant to render those micro-techniques of power which inscribe and normalize not only individuals but also collective, organized bodies'. These new practices do not sit comfortably with institutions that in the past have prided themselves on 'academic freedom' and the 'pursuit of knowledge for its own sake' as a largely individualized pursuit.

The tension of the 'management of knowledge' and control of academic work practices in the academy by the new management cadre is also reflected in the use

of new metaphors. Kennedy (1983) at Stanford likened academic management to 'herding cats' and in this way highlights the intense independence of academics and also the difficulty of presenting the institution as a cohesive part of the 'knowledge sector'. Marginson and Considine (2000: 133), in their comprehensive study of Australian universities, note the metaphor of making 'the butterflies fly in formation'—the metaphor with which one manager responsible for the management of research at his institution expressed frustration in the task he was charged with, supposedly harnessing the creative energy of his institution.

These new metaphors situate key tensions for knowledge workers, knowledge creation, and knowledge management—the tensions between autonomy and control, the individual and the corporate. These tensions prompt us to ask: to what degree does knowledge remain individualized and highly tacit intellectual capital? And to what extent can the university, or other partners capture knowledge creation to maximize organizational position rather than reflect individual engagement with professional interests and inquiry?

It is within the context of universities increasingly reconstructing themselves as enterprises to compete in the knowledge business that new models of higher education are being forged. Manifested in the form of WBL programs they promise to position universities in the 'real world' and also maximize the knowledge resources of the three key partners; namely the employee, the organization and the university. But before exploring how this partnership is played out, having analysed how things look from the university side, we will turn to an exploration of the context and motivations of actors in the corporate organizational field.

Corporate Organizations

That corporate organizations are operating in highly ambiguous environments is undeniable. Fuelled by globalization, the crisis manifests itself in quickening technological innovation, increased competition, changing markets, shortening product life-cycles, increasing complexity of work, and the loss of capability of corporate organizations. As Clarke and Clegg (2000: 49) put it, such rapid change manifests itself in a relentless search for 'newness'. Citing Pascale (1990), 'who takes the consumption and shelf life of management fads as an indicator of managerial panic', they argue that 'while there are valid aspects of most of these ideas, what is wrong is the piecemeal fashion in which they are implemented and the impatient shift from one to another without any sense of the context in which they must be embedded'. It is within this relentless search for 'newness' that the discourses of the knowledge-based economy have emerged, calling for 'the leveraging of knowledge to drive increased social and economic progress' (Drucker, 1992; OECD, 1996; Stewart, 1997).

As part of the discourses of the knowledge-based economy, a 'new' worker identity has been constructed—that of the 'knowledge worker'. Rather than 'knowledge work' representing a specific labour category, the creation of this new label seems to signify an attempt to challenge the older view that employees are not employed to think but to do. Or, more philosophically, it is expressed against the type of thinking that Voltaire (1958) was engaging in when he said 'Let's work without thinking about it. It is the only way to make life bearable.' Proponents of

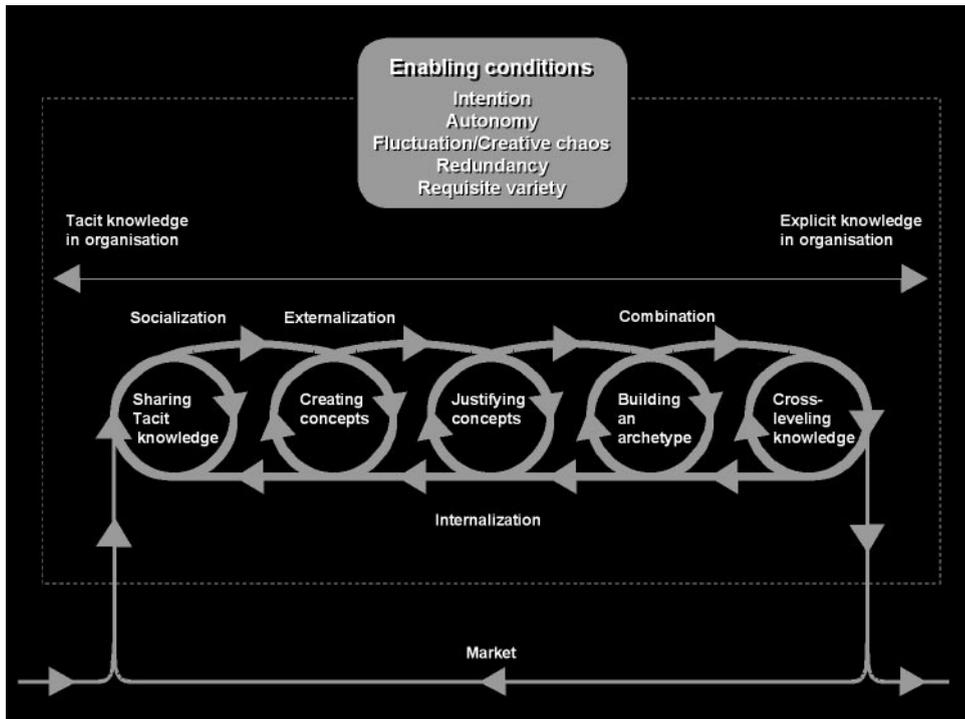
the knowledge-based economy stage a valiant war against the Voltairians in the workforce. Key tenets are that an uncertain economic climate and an emerging global marketplace have caused organizations to seek new more knowledge-based ways of functioning to increase their competitive advantage. Rather than focusing on 'size, specialization, job description and price', there is a growing emphasis on knowledge production and management. Equally, knowledge development and organizational learning are increasingly being identified as key factors in the long-term success of organizations (De Geus, 1997; Peters and Waterman, 1992; Senge, 1990). Indeed, a globalized marketplace has meant that in many organizations strategy has been devolved from being a separate functional area to being the responsibility of all 'knowledge workers'.

Shifts in work practices have implications for the types of skills required of workers. Thus as Cairney (2000: 2) puts it, the change includes 'a rise in the importance of generic skills including the ability to work more autonomously, monitor their own output and behaviour, work as part of flexible teams, adapt to change and think creatively'. The possession of tertiary education is no longer necessarily a defining characteristic of 'knowledge workers'. In the face of a transition from 'physical' to 'discursive labour' a key question that emerges is how are such transitions in conceptions of work to be managed in organizations? Perhaps the most notable answer has come from the doyens of organizational knowledge management, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), who argue that the key to 'renewal' and consequent 'knowledge conversion' is the interaction between both tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit is defined as 'the rich, untapped source of new knowledge' (1995: 84). Such knowledge has to be converted into tangible explicit knowledge so that it is 'transmittable in a formal, systematic language' (1995: 59). Through detailed observations of knowledge creation in Japanese firms they maintain that the knowledge conversion process can be understood as comprising five phases (1995: 62; see Figure 1).

Such work has been taken up by many management gurus and is widely cited as a way forward in thinking about the 'new' production of knowledge in the workplace. However, there are reasons to be more critical. First, Polanyi stated in his theory of tacit knowledge that it is 'embodied'; therefore, it remains 'personal' knowledge and thus cannot be made explicit. Second, there is the implied neutrality and 'newness' of such knowledge conversion. To expose the neutrality of 'knowledge conversion' Garrick and Clegg (2001: 134) drew on a provocative metaphor—that of the gothic tale of Dracula 'who relies on the blood transfusions of living souls'. They argue that 'at the base of transformations is a transformation of value: from an individual tacit asset, knowledge is transformed into an organizationally explicit factor of production'. Equally, the 'newness' does not lie in workers having tacit knowledge—which they have always had—but rather in management's engagement with it as a source for fuelling further competitive advantage.

Thus, on the one hand we have universities seeking to translate their mode one knowledge into the mode two world, engaging corporate organizations to do so. On the other hand, these same corporate organizations perceive that universities, with their special skills at codifying knowledge, may be able to assist them in tabulating the tacit knowledge that their employees have. The universities claim that they can do this through the mechanism of instructing and assisting employees in the production

Figure 1



of learning agreements. These learning agreements, corporate organizations are assured, will make explicit what was previously implicit and tacit. It looks like a happy meeting of mutually aligned interests. However, there is one small factor in the equation that we have yet to consider—the employee.

The Employee

We will introduce the employee into the picture through a quote from one of our respondents, Anastasia. Anastasia is talking about how she aligned herself with her company's human resource management policies, an exercise she took seriously. In this it seems she was alone. Other colleagues, more skilled game players, played it strategically rather than seriously.

It is really what I would call the intention that is the real driver of change—I was such a fool because I got real data to improve the business. But my colleagues they just gave it [360-degree feedback] to their friends they all got very positive comments but mine was more mixed—as you would expect because it was real. In the end we are just measured on the numbers.

This story is typical of the dilemma faced in implementing new tools designed to improve business performance. The disjuncture is between 'how success is measured' driving 'how the game is played'. What Anastasia learnt from this lesson is that although tools such as 360-degree feedback can provide useful data to

improve business performance, engagement with such a process requires a supportive environment where such data are used for the purposes of improving the business rather than pitching peer against peer. She learnt that she could trust neither the integrity of her colleagues nor the public rhetoric attached to new management initiatives. And this was the context into which workplace-based learning then came, unheralded and unexplained, rather than as a part of the organization management's commitment to the seductive discourse of the knowledge economy, which was reframing the organization's expressed vision. Under the mantra of 'Employer of choice', and 'Develop our people', knowledge development was seen as intrinsic to the sustainability of the business. Significantly, for most in the business, knowledge remained 'intangible' and was not yet explicitly articulated as the language of business. There was a gap between the rhetoric of the vision and the reality of the practice. In the words of one senior manager in a Finance business unit:

ABC Co is too conservative to have knowledge management or development explicitly as a business driver. We have the strategic goals of 'customer focus', 'integrity', teamwork' and 'accountability'. Perhaps knowledge is implicit in these, but really we are more market driven.

By contrast, in internal services such as library services, corporate development, and so on, 'bottom up' knowledge movements have swelled. Holding functions traditionally marginalized, and even devalued, within the corporate organization because they are seen as a 'cost' rather than a source of revenue accrual for the business, workers in such units are in the 'business' of justifying their existence in organizations in which success is measured largely by financial return. Thus the discourses of the knowledge-based economy were particularly seductive for these workers, in that they provide a framework by which their value might be acknowledged. Dependent on senior management 'buy-in', it is from these internal services, in particular, that a spate of strategic initiatives have been launched. The library services now link strategically with IT to provide a raft of online portals, virtual libraries and so on. Equally, the corporate capability unit has designed capability maps, undertaken research into 'engagement' and, of significance to this article, has been the driver of the WBL program in partnership with the university in question.

The corporate organization in question, ABC Co, had recently de-mutualized, striving to become a forward-thinking and thrusting financial corporation. Finance, rather than insurance, the old core business, had become the main game. Doing deals is what counts. The central business unit employees were to be found in finance and they largely marginalized work-based learning when it was introduced into the organization. It was the more marginal employees who were unsure how they fitted into the finance and a profit-driven view of the organization that latched on to it most strongly. For these people, the idea that there was value in knowledge was empowering. We will now explore what WBL looks like in practice.

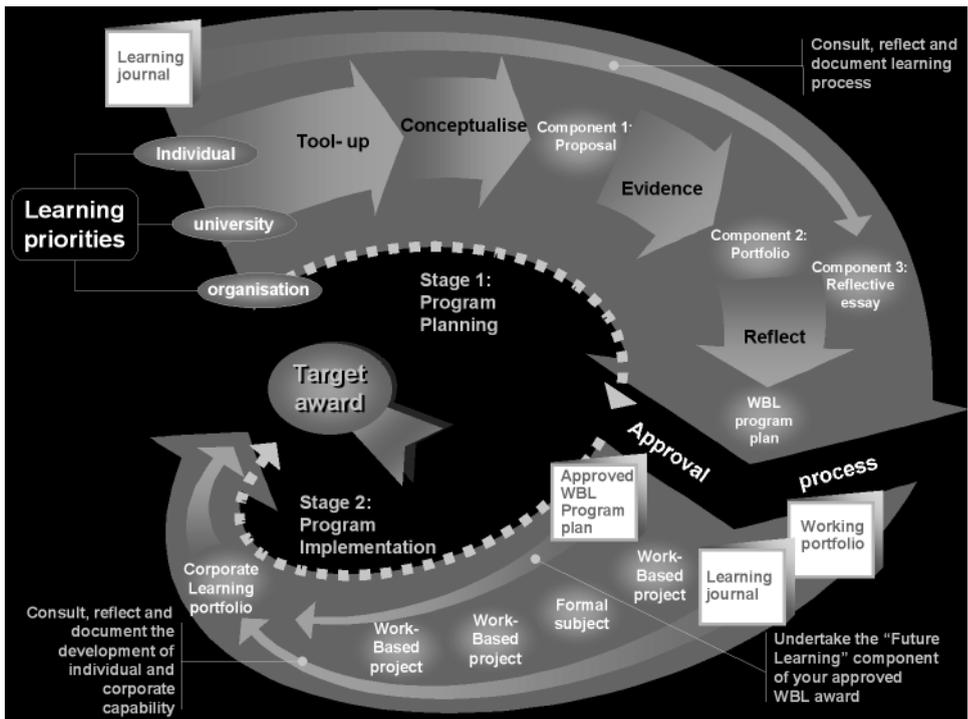
The WBL Program in Practice

The WBL program is a process-framed model of learning which comprises two stages: Program Planning and Program Implementation. During the Program

Planning stage, participants develop a WBL program plan in negotiation with their line manager in the workplace and an adviser from the university. The text of the WBL program plan forms a frame for the negotiation of the participant's WBL award. It comprises three components: a proposal, a portfolio, and a reflective essay (see Figure 2).

The proposal is the 'blueprint' for the participant's WBL award. It is organized around a number of areas of learning. The 'areas of learning' correlate to the 'subjects' in a conventional university award. However, in a work-based learning award the titles of the 'areas of learning', rationale for their inclusion, and the learning outcomes, are negotiated by each of the stakeholders, taking into account the skills, knowledge and values the learners have, as well as what their 'future' learning needs might be. The employees have to make a claim in which they justify their case and explain their documenting evidence. A claim for allowing up to two-thirds of the content of a degree to be examined through a portfolio enables WBL participants to present a case for the formal recognition and assignment of academic credit points for 'areas of learning' that demonstrate current capabilities. Finally, prior to submitting their WBL program plan for approval, the learners write a reflective essay that focuses on the learning gained from engaging in stage one of their award. In stage two, WBL participants undertake the 'future learning' areas as articulated in their WBL program plan. 'Future learning' may be

Figure 2



done by undertaking work-based projects (based on an action learning model of research) and/or by attempting formal subjects.

Changing Conceptions of Knowledge Work

The WBL program demonstrates an increased recognition on the part of the university that knowledge is created and produced in a range of settings—the university being but one site in which learning occurs. This manifests itself in a number of ways. First, the WBL program acknowledges that learners may come to the university setting with a range of skills, knowledge and values that form part of the curriculum of university-level learning. Second, that students should be awarded credit for this prior learning. Third, that the nature of this knowledge is performative.

The partnership model for the development of a tertiary award between individuals, employers and the university also poses a challenge to a traditional view of curriculum as a pre-defined or prescribed arena of disciplinary or professional content. Work-based learning privileges the active pursuit of ways of seeing the world rather than absorbing pre-defined content and skills grounded in extant worldviews. In this way WBL represents what Lankshear et al. (2001:1) refer to as a ‘curriculum of the postmodern condition’ in that it both reflects the current socio-cultural context and provides a framework within which some critical purchase on these developments may be formulated. The WBL model should not be thought of as being devoid of content, rather that the individual is engaging in content in a different way (see Figure 3).

Therefore, with the support of their university adviser and workplace manager, WBL participants engage in a process of collaborative critical inquiry into their work practices, which has as its starting point a consideration of the challenges facing organizations in general and each participant’s own organization in particular. From this point participants then reflect on the implications these challenges have for their organization’s identity and their own professional identity. These understandings inform the development of the individualized curriculum that constitutes the basis for the participant’s award in which participants identify and articulate both their current capability and potential knowledge gaps.

Learning in the WBL program is defined as a social practice rather than one of individual endeavour in reproducing the insights enabled by other authorities. The emphasis is on the examination of the relationship between learning and work. Thus the individual, the workplace and the university are each seen to have a stake in contributing to the enrichment of the learning context and curriculum. A negotiated process of learning, involving representation and support from both the university and the workplace, is privileged over an exclusively ‘expert-driven’ content focus from either field. In this way, the WBL program provides a site in which what ‘counts’ as knowledge is negotiated.

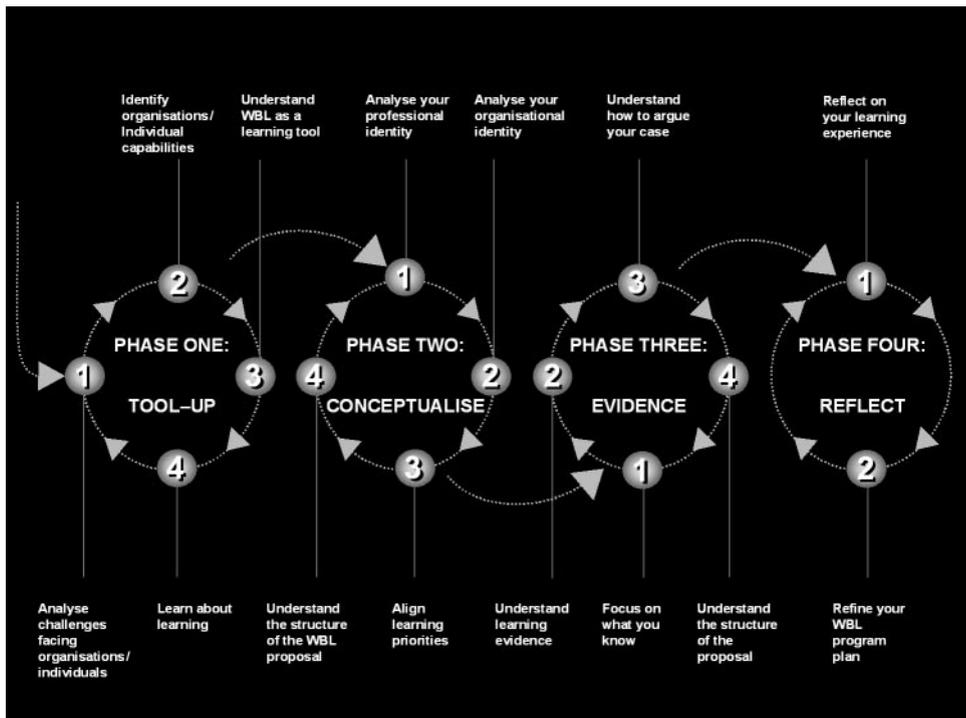
It is through this process of providing workers with ways critically to frame and re-frame understandings of their work and identity that the WBL program helps both organizations and individuals to identify, and to develop further, the capabilities they need to better meet the challenges of today’s economy. However, engagement in

critical analysis, although an integral part of postgraduate work, is not always welcome in corporate organizational life, as Garrick and Clegg (2001) note:

To make sense of the world through formulating and asking critical questions can be made ‘out of bounds’ [...] seem to be ‘uncool’ in the drive for performativity because they might be interruptive of privileged work-based sensemaking.

That it is ‘uncool’ to be ‘critical’ is clearly reflected in a dialogue from one WBL student who, in refining the focus of his work-based project for his WBL award, outlined the problems with a merger that ABC Co had made. It resulted, he said, in ‘two warring parties’ where one set of practices were clearly being defined as ‘ad hoc’ by the dominant party in the merger who then proceeded to ‘enforce its systematic way of doing things without a regard for the other companies practices’. At the same time ABC Co was engaging in a rhetorical ‘double-speak’ of ‘negotiation’, ‘collaboration’, and so on. However, when the works of critical theorists were suggested as a way of framing his argument within the literature review for his work-based project, he back-tracked and said, ‘Look, sorry for whinging . . . I have had a bad day’. It was then that he went on to explain that it was clear from discussions he had already had with his workplace coach (who was also the senior manager whose responsibility had been to ‘ensure the smooth transition of the merger’) that he was ‘expected [to discuss] efficient ways of engaging in a change management process’ within his work-based project. ‘Talking

Figure 3



critically about the problem [in his work-based project report] . . . would . . . not be appreciated as it would not be seen to be part of the solution' and even worse be seen as 'criticism of [his] manager' which would 'only bring [him] more grief'.

The negotiated process is characterized by a number of tensions and conflicts of interest. For, as ten Bos puts it (2000: 36) in discussing organizational practice:

The belief in hard facts is still firm in place. They are the stuff reality is made of. Managers therefore should find and describe these facts and base their decision on such activities. That facts are fabricated, conjured up, or invented during the decision-making process and that managers are part of reality rather than subjects outside it has no place in the rational world.

The belief in hard facts is also held by many academics. In this sense a typical learning experience that WBL participants (and potentially advisers) may encounter in undertaking WBL is initial excitement about the flexibility of the program as they engage in their role as 'constructor', and then mounting anxiety about its lack of 'factual content' and prescribed boundaries. As a learning experience it is not neutral—it is the students' responsibility to decide what is important and what is not in negotiation with other stakeholders. Equally, students have to justify these decisions and finally have to argue and present their case in writing. Indeed, for learners to build the curriculum of their award, then, as Anderson and Williams put it, they must exercise a degree of reflexivity that is not normally called for:

Past experiences are revisited and reinterpreted from a particular 'now' position, providing a story, a probable coherence that is in part justificatory . . . the authors themselves select from the vast amount of material available to them. They are central to the process of prioritising certain experiences and of interpreting and reinterpreting these. (Anderson and Williams, 2001: 4)

The premise of using autobiography in a learning context is, as Anderson and Williams point out, that 'we use our present understandings of "who we are" to reshape past understandings, we reconstruct our biographies in an effort to bring them into greater congruence with our current identities'. The concept of the 'construction' and 'reconstruction' of identity clearly regards the notion of identity as 'fluid, fractured and multiple'—individuals having 'contradictory subjectivities constituted through their participation in a range of discourses' (Anderson and Williams, 2001: 7 and 8). As Wenger defines it, identity 'yields the following characterizations' as:

- Negotiated experience.
- Community membership.
- Learning trajectory.
- A nexus of multimembership.
- A relation between the local and the global. (1998: 149)

Indeed, in constructing the curriculum of their WBL award, participants reflect on such definitions of autobiography and identity. They are thereby provided with some 'thinking tools' with which to analyse a wide range of learning experiences that include, but go well beyond, their current work context, when determining the 'areas

of learning' that will make up the curriculum of their award. Such experiences may include past work experiences, educational experiences or even other relevant experiences from more private spheres of their lives. Credit is awarded on the basis of the connections the participant is able to demonstrate between the knowledge gained from these experiences and knowledge required at work.

The performativity of WBL focuses on changing the way in which people work by engaging them in a process by which they scrutinize themselves and hence also challenge what is valued. Thus work-based learning parallels workplace activities such as the negotiation of performance agreements, and peer reviews. There is an immediate contrast between WBL and workplace training: the latter is generally lock step, whereby the learners are seen to do and thus, by implication, understand, what the instructor deems as essential knowledge. As Ball, in discussing performativity, puts it:

[workers] are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, 'add value to themselves', improve their productivity, live an existence of calculation. They are to become 'enterprising subjects', who live their lives as 'an enterprise of the self'. (Ball, 2000: 18)

For example, in considering the relationship between a home experience and the identity of 'being a foster mother' with experience and identity as a 'change consultant', the boundaries between such conceptions are collapsed and fused in new ways by engaging in new 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1968). Indeed, such experiences are no longer separated by space, or by time—'at home' and 'at work'—nor by role—as 'foster mother' and 'worker'—or by function—such as 'nurturer' and 'change consultant'. Rather, links are sought which relate the experience of being a foster mother to the capabilities seen to 'make up' the 'body of knowledge' required as a change consultant which is relevant for inclusion in a postgraduate degree. Thus what was previously constituted as mundane is reconstituted as 'operations management', 'negotiation', 'resource management', 'negotiation', 'change management', 'people management', and so on. In this way, the student-worker-learners shape and reshape their understandings of their identity and practices both of their 'own accord' and 'in their own interests', as well as doing the activity of 'writing up' such reflections part within work-time and part in their own time. Boundaries are further blurred between home and work as well as between the personal and the professional.

Indeed, through the 'textual' practices of 'playing' with decisions about what to include and exclude in their negotiated award, as well as what they should 'label' such knowledge, they discover what is palatable to both the world of work and the academy. Thus, in developing their customized award, the student-worker-learners come to see and feel the fuzziness and arbitrary nature of the boundaries of what counts as knowledge. The questions inevitably become, should they include 'teams' and 'collaboration', 'quality' and so on? These questions form some of the current work discourses of our day. They involve choices about the language to be used to 'write up', and thus represent, themselves as professionals.

In this light, the forging of partnerships with universities to undertake WBL awards may be seen as a process of control by which worker identity and established work practices are contested and reformed. For in constructing their WBL award participants have to 'name' and justify the subjects or, in the language

of work-based learning programs, the 'areas of learning'. For these areas of learning to be 'valid' for inclusion in the program they need to align with the learning priorities of each of the stakeholders. In this way tacit knowledge is made explicit and hence more controllable. In discovering what they know, they reveal who they really are, and what they really know, to their corporate watchers: potentially, they render up power by making themselves less inscrutable.

The ceding of power is only potential, however, because there are tensions around the role of the line manager in the learning agreement. Initial responses by many managers asked to perform this role are that they may be prepared to sign-off the financial support, but many of them declare themselves to be 'too busy', 'incapable', 'uncomfortable' or 'unwilling' to engage with their role as coach or mentor in the learning relationship when participants seek their support. Indeed, in spite of the role of 'manager as coach' being widely espoused in both the management literature and organizational practice as an integral part of the role of supporting knowledge development and increasing competitive advantage within the organization (Keichel, 1991; Kinlaw, 1989; Reich, 1987), many line managers don't seem to relish being coaches. As one WBL participant reported:

My manager never read any of my work. I'd even give him just a summary rather than the real thing because he always said he was too busy . . . But he still didn't have time. I was really pleased with some of the ideas I was having especially with the directions I was taking with my Work-Based projects. They were real ways to improve the business. I tried to explain, but he was always too busy. So, I gave up—It's better really just to keep your head down and not to make a big thing about it.

Clearly, the role of 'manager as coach' is not always consistent with the identity or interests of many managers operating in environments where performance remains largely measured by the short-term financial success of the business. As Field puts it, 'despite initiatives designed to foster empowerment and learning [. . .] and despite management espousing organizational learning and associated ideas, the reality often observed is that managers act in ways that disempower employees and undermine opportunities for positive, contributive learning' (Field, 1998: 77). Citing Hirschhorn (1991) and McCaffrey et al. (1995) he argues that organizational learning presents a paradox for managers in that 'in organizations where employees are encouraged to exercise power and to learn, how does management stay in control? After all, genuinely empowered workers may not want to apply themselves to management's goals' (1997: 150). Thus a tension is produced whereby:

[M]anagers become increasingly insecure. They respond by tightening controls, and by undermining activities likely to facilitate learning. However, when controls become too tight, employees hold back, and creative input is inhibited. (Field, 1998: 78)

Additionally, the WBL program extends to reshaping the identity of academics as they grapple with their role as 'interpreter' of knowledge of the workplace. Some of these challenges include trying to measure the value of knowledge in credit points that learners have gained largely from their experience at work—and therefore may not include familiar theoretical concepts that, academically, are the normal ways of making sense of a body of knowledge. Such an experience can be

confronting and also very time consuming as advisers work on an individual basis to help participants to conceptualize and to 'write up' the curriculum of their award so that it will meet the assessment requirements.

The WBL participants have to translate between the evident reluctance of their supervisors to coach them, the lack of context on the part of their academic supervisors for what they are doing, and their own sense of ambiguity as the person who has to manage the intersection of what can seem increasingly to be two estranged worlds. In one learning is valued but the context in which it is occurring, being work-based, is not understood; in the other the context is understood but coaching learning that is seen to be university-based is something that is not regarded as a legitimate part of the job.

Working with Knowledge in Partnership

In this final section of the article we explore the effectiveness of the WBL program from the perspectives of both the university and corporate organizational fields.

A University Perspective

That the WBL program remained a non-profit-making enterprise in the university in question would suggest that there were other reasons for its continuing existence, as symbolic of something that it was important to project to the market, to the government, or to the university as a whole. The WBL program was a 'boundary testing' activity or experiment which 'stretches understandings of possibilities' (De Geus, 1997: 14). It sat firmly within the university's practice-based framing—a 10-year vision plan for the university. It generated a positive message that the university is both 'in' and 'of' the real world, both within and without the university.

From the perspective of individual academics the responses to WBL also varied. For some, WBL prompted crass language—terms such as 'cash cow', 'bums on seats' and 'high-class escort agency' reflect a disregard for the financial underpinning of the enterprise, perhaps even an indication of the lack of respect for the hybridity of the employment status of those employed in the WBL unit. For academic colleagues, and indeed members of the WBL team, there was a sense of their professional identity being, to some degree, that of ambiguous interlopers in the academy. Such a perception was reinforced by the use of management titles and responsibilities that might sit more comfortably in a corporate organization than an academy, where, in the main, employment categories are divided into the two clear codes of academic and support staff. There is also a certain questioning of the students the WBL program attracts. As Anderson and Williams put it 'some individuals can lay claim to a student identity easily, moving at eighteen with the appropriate qualifications to elite institutions, their identity publicly endorsed and legitimated. Others are far more uncertain' (Anderson and Williams, 2001: 2).

For WBL participants this 'uncertainty' manifested itself as follows. First, they were all in full-time employment, which for many meant a 50–60 hour week, leaving little time to take on further responsibilities, such as tertiary study. Second, they often had no undergraduate qualifications; hence they had little experience

of academic life. And third, they sought work-relevant learning rather than a generalist education.

There was also a questioning of the program's lack of embeddedness within the organizations. This was because the WBL unit was not attached to a school (the basic academic unit in the faculty) but reported as a 'special project' directly to the Dean's Unit in the Faculty of Business. The WBL unit's lack of embeddedness in existing organizational structures within the university and, at times, the hybridity of the WBL team's employment status, provided a freeing up of identity and structural boundaries. Freedom was allowed with which to develop a 'new model of learning' for higher education, but at the same time this freedom and autonomy produced a disconnection with the broader academic community. It perpetuated a lack of ownership on the part of the academics for the WBL program and hence also a lack of responsibility and even a questioning of the legitimacy of the program, making recruitment of academics as advisers and assessors for the WBL program problematic. In addition, it called into question the degree to which the WBL program was able to bring about significant change to the identity of the university as an organization or the identity of individual academic actors within the university field, a point reflected in the long-standing questioning of the 'location' of the WBL program, with alternative, more centralized, shared-services locations mooted at various times at Academic Board. In short, the WBL unit seemed to have been designed as an organization innovation that would have trouble distributing its innovation throughout the system. Commenting on the tensions produced by innovation in large organizations, Dougherty puts it that 'commitment to innovation cannot be separated from the organization as a whole . . . To be innovative . . . organization as a whole needs to embody the tension between freedom and responsibility' (Dougherty, 1996: 180). As we can see, this applied to WBL as an innovation.

Some academics also saw WBL as being a 'strange move' on the part of the university: in Bauman's terms, where the role of the university and the academic is to be the 'legislator' of knowledge, this concern would be entirely explicable. For these academics it was a labour to be avoided or, failing this, to be done for the most part with little love, regarded as far from the privileged pursuit of individual research. A common response when recruiting academic staff was for them to ask, 'what's in it for me?' A fair enough question from academics whose working lives are becoming increasingly frenetic and whose poor salaries, by industry standards, require supplementation through other activities, including consultancy, which may be more lucrative than further engagement in the university's activities. However, for others, WBL could have been perceived as useful for career progression within the university in that it served as evidence of their engagement with the university's primary goals of practice-based education. It was also a potential source of contacts with industry and in this way a vehicle for collaborative research and with it the possibility of fulfilling another strategic goal. For a minority of academics whose interests are in exploring 'new models of teaching and learning in higher education' WBL offered opportunities to engage in a negotiated curriculum process, portfolio development, and a focus on learning and work. Such underpinnings offer ample opportunities for academics wishing to rise to the postmodern challenge of the role of 'interpreter' in Bauman's terms.

A Corporate Organizational Perspective

WBL parallels what Kane et al. (1994), in studying management attitudes towards training and staff development (TDS), refer to as human resources planning, in that it is a long-term investment, with a 'focus on creating a tight fit between TSD and targets in the human resources plan (HRP)'. Initially, there was a high level of senior management buy-in for WBL—at least rhetorically. However, as the CEO and senior HR managers were promoted or indeed left the company, WBL became less of a strategic imperative within the organization and in fact was never integrated within existing HR strategy.

The large initial grant that ABC Co provided the university for the set-up of the pilot of the WBL program in 1996, and the high participant drop-out rate (many through redundancies), suggest that ABC Co has borne significant financial costs in supporting the WBL program, with few tangible gains. However, in spite of radical cuts to both training and development programs and to staff in the corporate development shared services, where the WBL program is located, the WBL program remained part of the suite of programs offered to staff. However, in the meantime, new strategic initiatives have been both mooted and implemented—the latest being the 'global campus' with few attempts made to integrate the WBL program within its framework. WBL's lack of embeddedness was only exacerbated by the high turnover of WBL coordinators at ABC Co (six between 2000 and 2003).

That ABC Co re-signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with its university partner for a further three years in 2001 would suggest that the WBL program represented something beyond just a potential financial benefit for the organization. An answer to what this could be was seen, perhaps, at the elaborate ceremony staged for the signing of the MOU. Located in the salubrious environs of level 26 of the ABC tower, with panoramic views of Sydney Harbour, the CEO of ABC Co and the Chancellor of the university signed the MOU for a further three years in the presence of senior management from both organizations. From ABC Co the speeches focused on 'people being our greatest asset' and WBL representing an 'investment' in the 'strategic positioning of ABC Co within the finance sector'. On the part of the university the focus fell on the 'academy meeting the business on mutual ground' and the 'synergy of business and university interests and knowledge'. Paradoxically, there were also some precursory jokes about 'financial gain'. And, perhaps even more importantly, photographers were present with the promise of a spate of stories for both ABC Co and its university partner on WBL in subsequent weeks. Significantly, however, the re-signing was only made after it had been agreed, at ABC Co's behest, that the clause outlining their commitment to provide a base number of participants per annum was waived from the contract, thus minimizing financial risk.

Forming partnerships with universities whose dominant capital is 'cultural' and 'symbolic' is a way for corporate organizations to demonstrate an investment in their people and the strategic thrust of the business. The implied message is that the corporate organization is not exclusively concerned with amassing financial capital; it is prepared to invest in employees within the organization. However, this is balanced by the corporate organization's need for improved staff retention strategies to stem the flow of employee turnover, and consequently retain

corporate memory. Supporting employees to undertake tertiary study may also be flagged as a tactic to prepare individuals, and consequently the organization, for the knowledge economy and beyond. However, nothing will save individual employees from redundancy if their business unit is not making money. And, paradoxically, in the hyper-competitive environment of the finance sector today, especially in a situation which has seen ABC Co's share price more than halved in three years, and the company restructured financially, undertaking further qualifications can even pose a threat to the 'security' of line management (many without credentials themselves). Thus credentialing, although engaged in by the individual employee to secure employability, may actually result in vulnerability of employment status. As one manager 'jokingly' remarked, 'I'm not going to slog to do my Master's—none of them get to keep their jobs.' Seemingly, the respondent was suggesting that you can be too qualified for today's employment market: paradoxically, even if you are financially supported to undertake such study by your employing organization.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that both universities and corporate organizations, as part of a broader socio-economic trend, are engaging in a new legitimization of the workplace. These trends manifest themselves as follows. The development of the rhetoric of the knowledge economy allows for an elective affinity, in theory, between the traditional purveyors of mode one knowledge, and those situated in the new mode two knowledge. To secure a practical rapprochement between the two types of organizations, WBL schemes have been proposed. In practice, the success of these programs depends on key but recalcitrant actors within each type of organization.

In the corporate organization the key recalcitrants are the supervisors who must play the role of coach but are most reluctant to do so, seeing it as neither their core responsibility nor as necessarily in their interests. They are, above all, strategic game players rather than captives of official rhetoric. Then there are the academics who teach the program. Many doubt that their interests are secured by validating the knowledge of something of which they have little knowledge and no context for appreciation. Last, there are the WBL participants themselves. They are well aware of the issues creating tension from the corporate side, especially those manifested in their lack of coaching. Also, they quickly sense whether or not their academic advisers are committed to the program. Hence, every one is making up their identity as something problematic: recalcitrant coaches, troubled learners, and uncommitted academics. These fabrications play an important role in making up the identity of the organizations and the key players in the field. The rhetoric in use by both the university and ABC Co stress the centrality of this type of practice to their commitments. By making the rhetoric public and embedded in vision statements they make these commitments transparent. However, paradoxically, as Ball puts it:

Technologies and calculations which appear to make [...] organizations more transparent may actually result in making them more opaque, as representational artefacts

are increasingly constructed with great deliberation and sophistication [...] the discipline of the market is transformed into the discipline of the image, the sign. (Ball, 2000: 10)

In both university and corporate organizational fields, fabrication is reflected in the manufacturing and conveying of messages that stress the role WBL plays in securing competitive advantage. For universities and academics in the current context this seems to mean it is enough for them to be seen to be of and in the real world. Equally, for corporate organizations and their employees, fabrication may be manifested in the construction of the appearance of having capabilities that demonstrate 'fitness for the knowledge age'. Impression management, to use Goffman's (1956) term, is the major part of the new knowledge game.

Postscript

Between the submission of the initial and the revised and resubmitted drafts of this article, the university abandoned the WBL experiment. Its director went back to his previous academic role. Non-academic staff redundancies were declared. The Manager, Learning Development, was physically shifted to a marginal location in the faculty, symbolic of her location; also her role and responsibilities were re-designated, and she was given a fixed-term contract with a two-year expiry date. The brave new world of WBL, mode two learning, and knowledge management can be said to have foundered on the usual reefs of profit, pride and politics.

Notes

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1. If this were the case, it would not be the first such historic crisis. Jarvis (2001: 3–4) traces the earlier transition of knowledge/power in universities from the Church to the state and argues that 'those who occupied the prestigious professorial chairs in the universities were frequently rich and powerful clerics; they controlled and legitimated the knowledge that underlay the whole social structure'. With the Enlightenment, scientific knowledge, rather than knowledge of theology, became the basis of the academic disciplines. This saw the advent of what is now referred to as 'knowledge for its own sake' as a 'new' contender in the earlier 'knowledge/power game'.

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