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More like work or more like school? Insights into learning cultures from a study of skatepark users

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Vocational education and training models have been conceptualised in a variety of ways, often distinguishing generic employability skills that raise awareness of the world of work from specific job-related competencies required for a career in a particular vocational sector. As a consequence, there are a plethora of labels used to capture these models (from 'vocationally related' or 'pre-vocational' to 'weak' or 'strong' vocational learning).

Amongst other things, these models are differentiated by how they contextualise learning content and knowledge, and, in particular, the extent to which the workplace is considered central to the learning process. For example, some models locate substantial elements of learning outside of the workplace, using simulated activities or work placements to integrate vocational content knowledge and practice. Whilst it is argued that this hybrid model enhances vocational learning (e.g. Schaap et al., 2011), it also treats the transfer of content from one context (the location of learning) to another (the location of practice) as unproblematic.

One concern is that the notion of transfer can underplay the importance of the implicit cultural practices of the workplace that influence professional performance. The ability to perceive and accommodate such practices as a form of workplace socialisation is an important element of learning that cannot be covered in vocational learning programmes outside of the workplace. This is because cultural practices are simultaneously constituted and reinforced through the fluid interactions of those engaged in professional practice, making such practices difficult to observe and articulate.

At the same time, this doesn't mean that such practices are not possible to evidence. For example, an ethnomethodological perspective argues that taken for granted and culturally defined behaviours are often patterned, and that their underpinning organisational frameworks can be observed through careful observation. Our study used such a perspective to explore socialisation and the underlying organisational mechanisms that underpin young people's informal learning interactions in a skatepark. Our observations suggest that the skatepark, similar to a workplace, is a complex, rule governed culture that is constituted by the interactions that take place within it. Close observation of this informal learning space allows insight into the specific cultural norms and participatory rules that enable engagement and learning to take place. At the same time, these insights suggest that vocational learning programmes need to give learners the opportunity to develop their contextual acuity of the workplace to complement their content knowledge.

Full paper

Johnson, M. & Oates, T. (2016) Making Sense of a Learning Space: How Freestyle Scooter-riders Learn in a Skate Park. *Informal Learning Review*, 140, 17-21.