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From ‘organisms’ to ‘boundaries’: the uneven development of theory narratives in education, learning and work connections

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This paper uses the metaphor of a ‘theory narrative’ to discuss the way in which the connections between education, learning and work have been understood. It identifies six theory narratives, and analyses each in turn, leading to an overview that suggests the way in which these explanatory frameworks might evolve in the future. The six narratives are grouped into three types. Functionalist and Marxist narratives constitute modernist, ‘structuralist’ explanations; liberal and progressive emancipatory narratives foreground educational aims and social practice; and boundary-crossing narratives emphasize the integration of learning and work practices. The paper plots the ebb and flow of these narratives in terms of their theoretical assumptions, policy implications and the inferences made for the learner as clear distinctions between educational practices and work practices are challenged.

Keywords: Education; Work; Learning; Theory; Narratives

Introduction

This paper discusses how the intersection between the practices and structures of work (and, by implication, employment) and education and learning have been theorized. Characteristic of this topic is the breadth and quality of writing and also its longevity. It is characterized, like most interesting aspects of social life, by continued uncertainty and lack of consensus on appropriate theoretical tools and thus interpretations of evidence. The paper does not claim to be exhaustive, but indicative of the richness of this theoretical story.

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The paper adopts the metaphor of a ‘theory narrative’ in the belief that it is possible to view the evolution of theory to frame the consideration of an area of social practice as a narrative or story. This story analyses the evolution of explanatory paradigms that have been offered in part by philosophers and educational thinkers and the research community, but also by practitioners and politicians.

The idea of a theory narrative is presented here as a means of capturing this story of ‘sense making’ (Weik, 1995) central to constructing understanding of the connections between work and education. In a Labovian sense (Labov, 1997), narrative is normally used to attribute meaning in the course of a sociolinguistic interview or a literary text, or in Bruner’s (1991) usage of the narrative, construction of reality. It emphasizes relational dimensions to events, behaviours, practices and utterances. In this paper, however, narratives refer to the sequencing and essence of theoretical frameworks that have characterized education and work connections. This sequence has not been linear, but is more akin to the ebb and flow of dominant, oppositional and emergent explanatory frames reminiscent of the way cultures shift and change over time (Williams, 1961).

One important, but almost throwaway comment in Michael Young’s important contribution to this meta-narrative (Young, 1971, p. 40, and in a slightly different way, 1990) is particularly apt. Writing on how the relationship between education and the economy might produce differently stratified knowledge, he asked a question concerning the circumstances under which the degree of integration between the economy and work and education and learning might be much greater and what the implications might be. It prompts a theory narrative with a central theme of how redefinitions of educational practice might play a part in the reconstruction and development of society in general, and work in particular.

This political/social/educational impulse has a long and distinguished history with small-scale attempts at redefining the relationship between education and work in the UK to which Karl Marx referred in his description of Robert Owen’s Factory Schools (Marx, 1976, p. 614) as a ‘germ of the education of the future’, and John Dewey’s preoccupation with the intellectual and the practical (Dewey, 1963) in ancient Greek writing on reason, the intellect, experience and their social location. It continues with recent discussions on yet another reorganization and reorientation of the vocational dimension of education in the UK, for example (see e.g. the Lambert Review, 2003, of Business and HE collaboration in the UK and the most recent pronouncements on skills). On the face of it, the discussion has moved on a long way since these earlier reflections, but there are persistent echoes of these past interests in the way we understand how education connects, or doesn’t, with the workplace (Roberts, 2004), and it is these interests that will shape the issues I want to address here.

This paper suggests how the connections between education and work have been conventionally understood or theorized. The intention of this overview is to give an introduction to six significant theoretical assumptions that pepper debates on education and work links, but are not always given form or shape. Some are underlying or tacit, others are explicit. This paper builds on an earlier work (Saunders, 2000). The story of these theories is not sequential, but uneven, although the last two perspectives
are relatively recent. There are sub-variants under each of these theory narratives (see Figure 1).

The paper considers the way work and education are understood to be socially, culturally and economically connected. These connections may be recognized at one end of a continuum as temporally stable, systemically determining or causal in nature or, at the other, as diffused, changing over time, uneven and highly situated. These types of theoretical considerations are often expressed in terms of the relative autonomy, or not, of education in its relation with other areas of society, and, in particular, the way society is stratified and how it connects with the economic domain. This paper takes each of these theory narratives in turn and depicts their main ‘plot’ lines and identifies how they contribute to our understanding of education, learning and work connections.

**Functionalist narrative**

The metaphor of organism imbues this narrative. Classic renditions of functionalism (Parsons, 1960) suggest the way a society’s different institutions, parts and practices intersect, combine and interact parallel to the way the constituent elements of an organism function to maintain the whole. This metaphor has its roots in the social theory of Auguste Compte’s ‘science of society’ (1990) in the eighteenth century. As a social theoretical framework it has dominated for two and half centuries and still has dominance in current policy debate. It is where description and prescription meet. It offers the possibility of a world in which education should logically coordinate with the requirements of work because that is how societies function. The lack of ‘technical’ congruence which appears to occur between educational and work processes is a matter of ‘dysfunction’ subject to better or more appropriate ‘fixes’ at the level of policy. Put crudely, if labour-market requirements are not being met, we should be looking for policy that brings them into line. Critically, this view presupposes that requirements can be ‘known’ and are of a ‘technical’ nature, and the ‘norm’ is that they can be met through the choice of appropriate policies. Frank Coffield (1997, 3) in a statement summarising late-twentieth-century policy in the UK, succinctly captures the functionalist argument, operating at the level of an individual economy:

developments in technology, in methods of production and in the globalisation of world trade are said to require a more highly skilled workforce. As a result, employers begin to apply pressure for educational standards to be improved. The outcome of this pressure can
be seen in the previous Government’s three White Papers on Competitiveness [in 1994, 1995 and 1996].

This narrative thread continues with vigour in current policy developments (Working Group on 14–19 Reform, press notice, February 2004):

The new structure is designed to ensure that all learners develop essential skills including mathematical skills, communication, ICT, problem solving and working with others. These are the attributes necessary for young people to participate and progress in the workplace, further learning and the wider community. (p. 9)

Functional connections between education and work can be understood in terms of two narratives, embodying the key metaphors of bonds (see Watts, 1983) and the idea of human capital (see Belfield, 2000). The functions of education described by Watts refer to the way education acts to ‘service’ social imperatives derived from employment. Importantly, the economic level of activity in this framework is logically prior to that of education and, to some extent, determines the educational experience. This theory narrative argues that society is able to disperse young people appropriately into employment on the basis of the testing and examination and their acquisition, or not, of qualifications at different levels. Watts and subsequently many others (for an interesting overview see Livingstone, 1997) have indicated the way in which this ‘technical’ logic breaks down. Among the problems are the failure of qualifications to accurately reflect skills and abilities, the lack of access to different types of qualifications, the different status of varying types of qualifications, the way employers use qualifications to select, the way young people use qualifications as exchange and the way different qualifications are valued on criteria other than usefulness at work.

Watts identifies ‘bonds’ that connect education with work. The socialization process embedded in pupils’ experience of schools is a second narrative in this tradition. This is a complex process that incorporates a continuation of highly differentiated cultural meanings developed through family, community and peer group. To some extent, it refers to the ways educational institutions sustain images and expectations of the kinds of work and work role to which different ‘types’ of young person might aspire. The third narrative concerns orientation and moves from the implicit processes characterizing socialization to the deliberate curricular interventions designed to help young people understand the world of work curricular interventions might also use the workplace in more general ways in which, to quote Jamieson (1993), the work-related curriculum might involve young people in learning about (a form of polytechnical education), for (socialization) and through (the workplace as a pedagogic aid).

The fourth narrative within this functional tradition focuses on preparation and refers to the role education has in equipping young people with specific skills and knowledge required by the workplace. This was before the development of an alternative narrative, often termed the ‘new vocationalism’ (Avis, 2004) and the Skills for Life (see DfES, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) policy that currently dominates policy thinking in the UK and the central policy of diversification in the national educational policies of many developing countries (Psacharopoulos & Loxley, 1985).
The second metaphor is ‘capital’. This theory narrative suggests the way human beings, or more precisely, their latent labour power, can be understood as a form of capital in which individuals and societies can invest. This investment will pay back, in societal terms, in increased wealth creation, productivity and competitiveness, and in individual terms, in better jobs, more money, prestige and life chances (see Teichler, & Kehm, 1995; Brennam et al., 1996). In functional terms, society and individual interests coincide as individual investment in education contributes to both the health of the whole society and accrue advantage to the individual. In this way, the market will function ‘socially’ and naturally.

The alternative, of course, is to operate a much tighter control over the supply of graduate labour to ‘fit’ the requirements of the labour market more precisely. This manpower planning theory narrative has its own problems, however. As Teichler and Kehm suggest (1995, p. 17), it is based on the assumption that educational policies should be orientated to expected and formulated needs and demands in order to reinforce economic growth and technological development. Problems arise in three areas. First, manpower planning can only work on the basis of quite draconian controls over undergraduate recruitment and graduate employment opportunities. Neither is possible in a capitalist economy or a social-democratic political state. Without these controls, other inducements are ineffective. Second, it has proved very difficult to predict manpower requirements on the basis of economic and social need analysis with any accuracy. This leaves the precise throughput of students impossible to coordinate. Third, in a quasi manpower-planning environment, projections of student enrolments are often wildly out, leaving key areas either under- or over-subscribed.

However plausible the functionalist narrative may be, at a whole-society and individual level it is simplistic and unravels under close inspection. For example, we can understand the massive expansion of higher education during the 1960s and early 1970s in the UK, as an application of a naïve human capital approach in which the existence of larger numbers of higher education graduates equated with economic and social gains. This theme of ‘competitiveness’ linked to the volume of individuals in post-compulsory education is still prevalent (see Gorad & Rees, 2002; Gorad, 2003). Socially, the phenomenon of the McGraduate (graduates occupying jobs well below that which their educational qualifications suggest they could occupy) and the investment in HE (see Purcell et al., 1999) has not produced the expected returns as the market did not function effectively (students perversely wanted, and still want, to engage in esoteric study like sociology and cultural studies), and the expected transfer of general intellectual capability to economic verve and dynamism did not automatically meet the fast-evolving requirements of new work processes. At the same time, the assumption (of human capital theory) that individuals would enrol in those subjects and degree programmes for which graduates are in demand on the labour market proved to be incorrect. The theoretical approach that follows the basic principles of market-governed investment on the basis of supply and demand simply breaks down in education and work relations. At other phases of education—i.e. primary and secondary education—there is plausibility in the argument that investment at either individual or social levels (particularly basic literacy and numeracy) is
a necessary condition for economic development or individual ‘advancement’. However, while it may be a necessary condition for certain types of growth, it certainly is not sufficient. We know, for example, that low labour costs and low educational levels can combine to produce rapid growth in developing economies. The complex interplay of skill base and economic growth in a global context challenges traditional assumptions concerning educational investment (see Brown et al., 2001).

**Marxist narrative**

The theory narratives in the Marxist tradition include both a critique of work–education connections in capitalist societies that share with the functionalist narrative a focus on structure and on fundamental social forces or trends that shape and determine key aspects of life, but also include a vision of an education for the future in which work, education and learning are integrated. While the analytic focus is on the determining primacy of the social formation, there have been many attempts to research the way in which these ‘base’ trends are played out in the day-to-day activities or practices of real people in real time. These narratives, often ethnographies, however, have difficulty in connecting plausibly with the overarching theory. They appear reductionist and eschew the multidimensional explanations for social action that might be applied. In order to maintain the integrity of Marxism as a theory narrative, we are required to depict the capitalist mode of production in which the basic relationship is one in which classes of individuals buy or sell labour power. These are the ‘great classes’. However, it is not an equal relationship. Those who buy labour power own the ‘means of production’ (factories, plant, etc.) and yield the forces of production (the technology). Those who sell labour power simply own their labour power and possibly their domestic capital (home). In order for surplus value to be created for the buyers of labour power, labour is under-priced and thus exploited. This is the central narrative of contradiction at the heart of Marxist theory.

There are, of course, many critiques of this basic formulation and it is unfashionably and hugely reductive. Some have argued it bears little relationship to the complex web of global and national economic interests and interconnections that characterize contemporary societies (see Vandenburghe, 2002). However archaic such an explanatory narrative may appear, debates informed by the idea that differences in society, particularly in power and economic advantage, are sustained through the education system owe much to these Marxist precepts.

The prescriptive narrative in this tradition, however, is positive and focuses on the reconstruction of work, education and learning as an integrated activity in post-capitalist society. This futuristic narrative has connections with the reconstructionists identified below. It posits a different relationship between education and work based on a new mode of production, namely socialism. This has expressions in polytechnical education in post-revolutionary Russia and the cultural revolutionary experiments in Maoist China. In both cases, work is at the heart of the new education. However, as Price has noted (1974, p. 13), direct reference to education in the writing of Marx is unusual; we note his reference to Owen above. Another rare mention is in the
‘Geneva Resolution’ of the International Workingman’s Association, where he says education is about mental training, bodily education and technical training (Marx, 1976, p. 345). Smart (1963), however, points to the integrative imperative to emerge from Marxist educationalists in both the Russian and Chinese post-revolutionary society. The great Russian educationalist Nadezhda Krupskaya had active learning processes and polytechnical study of work as central to her thinking (Castles & Wustenburg, 1980). Price (1979) discusses the way education in Maoist China stood against the three great separations—i.e. between theory and practice, town and country and red and expert. The unifying factor in these Marxist narratives on education and work is ‘integration’ (Houa Souen, 1975). The divisions between mental and manual are identified as central to capitalist domination through education. These grand alternative narratives have all been eclipsed by the dominance and international convergence of the functional narrative strongly associated with global competitiveness. Both China and the new Russian Federation have little left as a legacy of these earlier ideological prescriptions. It is, however, to the critique of ‘separation’ taken up in the mid-twentieth century critical narrative by European and American writers in the Marxist tradition that I now turn.

For neo-Marxists of the 1970s (Poulantzas, 1978; Althusser, 1984), education is depicted as an element of the state apparatus (the state in Marxist theory broadly sustains the conditions under which the capitalist mode of production can continue) and plays an ideological role in reproducing a culture that accepts as natural the existing social framework (Gramsci, 1985). To this extent, it is has parallels to the functionalist narrative. Both narratives seek to explain the way in which ‘order’ is maintained in a society and refer to the same phenomena, however from polar opposite epistemological assumptions. Functionalist narrative builds on integration, while Marxist narrative builds on contradiction. The functionalist narrative identifies socialization as a means of creating order, the Marxist narratives point to socialization as a means of maintaining social control. Functionalists identify selection as a means of distributing appropriate recruits into the division of labour. Marxists identify selection as a means of sustaining inequalities in the educational system and the advantage of one class over another in their access to power, prestige and life chances.

Possibly the most well-known theory narrative from an unreconstructed Marxist standpoint on education and work is to be found in the work of the Americans Bowles and Gintis some 30 years ago (1975), later developed by another American, Michael Apple (1993), and adapted by British theorists like Chris Schilling (1989) and Inge Bates (1989), who were writing on and researching the ‘new vocationalism’ of the 1980s in the UK. This narrative had oppositional status but has ceased to be influential as post-structural theory narratives concerned with situation, agency, identity, risk and context have eclipsed its grand design. Bowles and Gintis cultivated the metaphor of correspondence to capture the relationship between education and work in a capitalist economy, which, while heavily criticized and even made redundant by more sophisticated formulations (see Willis, 1977), has now undergone a resurgence in modified form. The metaphor of correspondence in this narrative refers to the way in which the social relations between teachers and pupils in schools produce deeply
socialized work habits and attitudes (often described as the *hidden curriculum*) in pupils, which correspond to those required by a disciplined and subservient labour force. Steeped in the assumptions of control and work practices of *Fordist* forms of work organization, this perspective emphasizes the social control dimension of school-based practices and underemphasizes the extent to which ‘useful skills’ for employment might be developed through the educational system.

The connection between school and work in the theory narrative produced by Willis does not foreground a simple socialization process in which the values of the school are internalized by the lads who are thereby formed into compliant workers. It is almost the reverse of this account. The lads have a view of their future lives as masculine, working-class identities. Their experience of school consists of a rehearsal of the culture they assume they will inherit. It is hard, grafting and includes many ingenious, often humorous, ways of undermining the authority of the ‘boss’. The school manifestly fails as an agency of occupational socialization in a technical or functional sense but succeeds as a rehearsal of the lad’s future work identity in which they collude in their own exploitation.

In the UK context, the collapse of the youth labour market and the change in the manufacturing base of the economy give these narratives an historical feel. They also fail to account for the way schools might prepare middle-class or studious pupils and the gender and race dimensions are completely absent. However, variations on the socialization or induction sub-narrative that focus on the middle or ruling class have been influential. Of particular significance is the work of French theorists like Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), who have identified the way education can play a part in the production of the cultural capital on which middle-class young people can draw to enter successfully the division of labour and the social networks of the rich and powerful.

In structural terms, a more sophisticated formulation concerns the separation of mental and manual labour in the school process that reproduces the relations that characterize the workplace (Bernstein, 1996). Interestingly, this suggests the way in which the Marxist narratives offer insight into the processes currently under way in the relationship between education and work. If we give broad credence to the view that work organization is changing and the character of labour at all levels is shifting from overtly hierarchic ‘command’ relations to more diffused devolved responsibility, the educational system might be required to explicitly intervene in the socialization of young people to attempt to prepare them for the new work order.

To the extent that systems like the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ), followed by the vocational GCSEs and the New Apprenticeships (see Fuller & Unwin, 2003) in the UK are designed around an integration of vocational and general academic processes and ‘key’ skills, we can see a change in focus (see Helsby *et al.*, 1998). If we add to this the dismantling of traditional stable working-class cultures over the past two decades in which class identities have become diffused and have been replaced in some geographical areas by localized *unemployment* cultures (Williams, 2002), then the relevance of Willis’s theory narrative to present circumstances in our schools shifts. What we might now be constructing is a narrative based
around neo-correspondence (see Saunders & Machell, 2000) in which the link between education and work is being expressed not in analytical, descriptive terms, but in a prescriptive language. In theoretical discourse, the structurally derived rehearsals of future work cultures are being replaced by the inclusion of explicit curricular designs that evoke the changes embodied in the new work order. In narrative terms, explanation gives way to legitimation. This process is focused particularly on the post-compulsory rather than compulsory sector of education in the UK (Hesketh et al., 2003).

This narrative points to the emerging prescriptive theory of correspondence as a mode of interpreting the link between higher education and work. The question is to what extent has the new genericism moved away from the kind of ‘academic genericism’ formulated by writers like Ronald Dore (1976) three decades ago. It is true that the new formulation has a much closer correspondence to the work profile identified by Teichler and Kehm (1995). But, in essence, it is almost the same as generic scholarly traits. New elements, however, are the inclusion of the rehearsal of more explicitly work-oriented processes like work-based projects and learning, working in teams, interdisciplinarity, project work, and social and communication skill development. The preoccupation with ‘employability’ in HE curricular terms (see Knight & Yorke, 2003) and its emergence as a theme for attention in the work of the Higher Education Academy and the new Quality Enhancement Framework within the Scottish system of HE are embodiments of this policy orientation.

In other words, these curricula are rehearsing a narrative in which the operationalization of the social and work context in which the traditional or liberal intellectual capacities were to be displayed. The deficit, to which these writers and policies refer, is not in academic practices themselves, but in their explicit connection to work practices. This latter process had been under-theorized and more or less seen as a form of organizational naturalism (it will just happen). The crucial change has been in the growing insistence that a range of bridging experiences must be provided which will enable students’ higher education experience to be more tightly coupled to their future work role. This explicitness has come from a narrative in which a crisis of confidence has been identified in the idea of the transfer of general intellectual capability. Government policy has reflected this lack of confidence and has absorbed tacitly the neo-correspondence analysis by the development of a range of interventions and pronouncements that are designed to edge HE teaching and learning towards these explicit bridging or reconstructionist activities. This theme will re-emerge later.

The liberal narrative

In an important sense, the phrase ‘liberal education’ has come to signify an antidote to those conceptions of education which are justified by reference to extrinsic factors or processes and have a largely instrumental approach to decisions on content, teaching or learning. It is in this light that ‘liberal’ narratives have entered the debate on education and work.

It is important to identify what kind of narrative it embodies. It can be traced to the Platonic dichotomy between the idea of a liberal education for its own sake, the
preserve of an aristocratic class, and an education for the masses which, given their
destiny as workers, should be shaped by the requirements of their future role in the
division of labour. Its legacy is the retention of ideas concerning the higher ideals of
effective citizenry, learning for its own sake and the notion of a general, unfettered,
universalistic curriculum free from the sectoral interests of time, class, economics or
politics. The narrative has tragic overtones as the proponents of liberal aims in the
education of young people are increasingly besieged by a rising tide of instrumentali-
sm (Corson, 2000). Others, however, have a more analytical stance as they chart the
theory narrative of liberalism into the twenty-first century (Scott, 2002).

What is important is the distinction between two dimensions of the analysis. What
students might be doing in the name of a ‘liberal curriculum’, and secondly, how this
might connect with their future working lives. Future work roles are important in the
liberal view. What is axiomatic is that young people are best prepared for these roles
by an educational experience that is ‘broad, deep and informed by a whole culture’. The
strategies employed to achieve the engagement with this ‘traditional’ curriculum
might well involve interactions with work not as direct preparation for particular
occupations, but as pedagogic process. The defining feature of this perspective is that
the link between education and work is expressed in terms of the educated person rather
than work requirements. An educated person will be, de facto, an effective worker in
this broad sense. Effectiveness, however, should not be understood in a narrow or short-
term frame or reducible to the requirements of particular employer interests or national
economies. It is a much loftier sense of effectiveness linked to the civilizing aims of
good citizenship. It may well be the case that an educated person will eschew the mind-
bendingly boring, the hierarchically restricting or the environmentally inappropriate
elements of the workplace. In which case, being an effective worker might well involve
resistance to such features within the courses of action implied by a democratic society.

The ‘liberal perspective’ considers as misconceived the explicit preparation for
work through work-related activities as part of a general education. According to this
view, explicit, functional preparation involving job-related skills and knowledge
should be undertaken while at work or immediately prior to undertaking it. Interest-
ingly, this broadly complies with a World Bank view (Middleton et al., 1993).

This perspective is arguing for what best prepares an individual for a rewarding and
responsible life. Work is not perceived in terms of wealth creation or competitiveness,
but through the eyes of the educator. So Paul Hirst and Richard Peters (1975), along
with Michael Oakshott, are probably the most influential British philosophers of the
liberal curriculum tradition who are able to identify the kind of general objectives to
which an educator might aspire—e.g. autonomy, creativeness and critical thought.
However, they argue that underlying these general objectives are ‘the achievements
of objective experience and further, the most fundamental objectives of all are those
of a cognitive kind, on the basis of which, out of which, or in relation to which, all
others must be developed’ (p. 61). These fundamental ‘modes of knowledge and
experience’ can be divided, they argued, into seven areas that are irreducible and
should form the basis of a general school curriculum. Notwithstanding various
updates and revisions, this formulation continues to be more or less intact and is at
the heart of the critique of a naïve neo-correspondence policy. The curriculum areas broadly correspond to the compulsory core curriculum embodied in the National Curriculum of the English system and would be recognizable, more or less, in any country in the world. What is important for this perspective is the democratic imperative that no child should be denied access to these forms of knowledge and experience in the mistaken belief that they are not ‘relevant’ either to them or an extrinsic interest like the needs of employers.

Relevance is not a matter of compromise on forms of knowledge, but a matter of pedagogic skill and design. A general induction into these forms of knowledge would form the basis of any other intellectual or ‘practical’ preparation, including work. There is the possibility that the debate has been falsely dichotomized, as Winch (2002) has suggested, and economic aims at a personal level are entirely justifiable on the basis of a release of individual ‘capacities’ (Winch, 2002, p. 103). Indeed, Hirst himself has adjusted his position recently to take some account of the ‘social nature of education’, as Yoo Jae-Bong (2001) has observed.

The main problem for this narrative lies in the extent to which young people are successfully inducted into the forms in the way envisaged by the philosophers. The reality has been that, on many occasions, the forms of knowledge have been taught and learned in disembodied chunks of memorizable information for the later regurgitation in a literate-based exam. Bruner and Olsen (1977) identified this problem as lying in the naïve psychology of learning inherent in this view and the almost complete lack of appreciation of problems of ‘transfer’ or ‘reconstruction’ such a view embodies. The outcome has invariably been that only those students with the cultural means of accommodating the strategic importance of this process have benefited. The rest have sifted themselves out of the educational process.

The progressive emancipatory narrative

This narrative is associated with styles of learning leading to the personal and social goals of individual growth, civic participation and democratic emancipation. It is possible to distinguish two important sub-themes. The first affiliates personal growth and ‘learner centredness’, its narrative beginning with Rousseau’s emphasis on the importance of developing ideas for ourselves; instead of being taught other people’s ideas, Émile is encouraged to draw his own conclusions from his own experience (Rousseau, 1962, p. 6). The second sub-theme is social reconstruction through empowered democratic participation. The meeting-point is that the style and processes of learning undertaken by individuals are central to the achievement of either goal. The fundamental position of this perspective is optimistic. It positions education centrally in social and personal reconstruction. It tends to underemphasize the social and political context or the structural determinants identified by functional and Marxist perspectives. It also underemphasizes the nature of the knowledge and skill that the liberal narrative has as a starting-point for deciding what should be learned. It attributes great transformative power to the educational process through the personal growth or cultural reorientation of individuals.
As in the liberal narrative, the work–education link is not an explicit preoccupation for the ‘learner-centred’ sub-theme. Its stance is generally justified by reference to a fusion of ideas containing elements of egalitarianism—i.e. the rights of the child or the learner should not be subsumed or repressed by the teacher or educator. The learner may well ‘know’ what is best for them, or what is in their best interests. The position of the educator is to ‘enable’ this process of discovery to occur rather than to direct it. This characteristic is concerned with a form of ‘interactional politics’ but the other; and possibly more profound, one is derived from a tacit theory of learning in which familiarity, individual practice and the extent to which learning is ‘situated’ or ‘contextualized’ are hugely influential on the quality and level of learning that is taking place. The thinker and educationalist Paulo Freire (1996), for example, understood the power of situated learning in his ideas on the way literacy programmes might work in rural communities. He linked the transformational processes of what he called the ‘dialectics’ of knowing’ and ‘conscientization’ that is the growing awareness of circumstances leading to action. A narrative thread closely associated with this emancipatory meaning is offered by researchers who have identified ‘informal learning’ through collaborative action as having both emancipatory outcomes and personal learning possibilities (see Foley, 2000).

Like the liberal perspective, the emphasis here is much more on the quality of learning, its role in the growth of the person, their sense of fulfilment and self-esteem as a result and, finally, their capacity to take up a responsible, thoughtful and active role at work or in civic society. This is certainly a Freirian aspiration. However, this narrative contains a number of assumptions. The most problematic is the last. It may well be that, in the view of the individual, work would not be fulfilling and a meta- or overarching value (like civic responsibility) might have no influence if the learner is in control and does not subscribe to it.

However, the idea of work is pivotal for the reconstructionists (Skilbeck, 1994) not as an instrumental justification, but in terms of the learning process and the future or current role of learners as working people. What is particularly important is that this narrative, like the liberal, is operating in the prescriptive, theoretical domain rather than the descriptive/analytical framework adopted by the structural perspectives. This prescription lays not so much in the learning theory embedded in reconstructionist ideas, but in the link between emancipated individuals and the polity. John Dewey’s work (1963) stands as the most influential and still relevant exposition of the position of work as a vehicle for learning, personal growth and active citizenship. His emphasis, however, was the link between experience or ‘doing’ and learning and thinking. ‘Doing’ had its most useful expression in ‘work’, or more precisely, ‘occupations’. He rejected the divisions between the mental and manual, but was quite clear that ‘work’ should be complex enough to allow for the ‘intellectual’ growth that was, for Dewey, the dominant aim of education. It was in the reflective process during and after experience that ‘cognition’ resides.

An important variant of the reconstructionist narrative theme has been the diversified curriculum that has characterized curriculum innovation in the post-colonial educational systems of developing countries. These innovations have proceeded in
an uncertain environment. Education has often been the site on which anti-colonial movements had fought battles for equal opportunity during the late colonial period. An element in the political platforms of independence struggle had consistently been opposition to a dual educational system. The recent history of the politicization of secondary schooling in South Africa is a case in point (see Enslin, 2003). These systems generally consisted of a schooling for the indigenous population which prepared the mass for work as agricultural labourers, for the few an academic curriculum to prepare clerks and low-level administrators and for a tiny minority, opportunity for higher education study, either in the colonial ‘mother country’ or in a few institutions which evoked the system of the white minority on a much less resourced scale.

Liberation had its expression in the educational field in the struggle for independence by an insistence on universal access to the academic curriculum (see Whitehead, 2003). The attempts by the colonial powers to adjust the curriculum of colonial states to reflect the agricultural destinations of most young people were fiercely resisted. Once independence had been gained in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, however, it was quite clear that an education based on the academic European system was glaringly inappropriate and fostered an elite, Eurocentric, cultural orientation, as well as demonstrating a hopeless lack of continuity with the lives of up to 80% of the population. Diversified systems soon began to appear. We might take the case of a particularly potent policy statement by President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania as an example of the reconstruction of the relationship between work and education in these new realities. By redefining the priorities and processes of educational institutions, he hoped to create a better match with what he understood to be the realities of life and work in a developing country. He wanted education to be a driving force for a change in culture, which, at the time of the publication of the policy of Education for Self-reliance’ in 1967 (Nyerere, 1974) valued education mainly as a means of upward social mobility for a small minority of successful school graduates with little other consideration. In other words, the ‘exchange’ value of education was paramount, with virtually no attention to its potential ‘use’ for the common good or national development. These systems developed curricula that included vocational elements and extra-curricular activities including work, school farms, etc. that were intended to evoke more realistically the likely work destinations of young people. At the same time, they attempted to encourage a more positive attitude among young people towards the rural way of life and nation building. To that extent, the aim of these approaches was to reconstruct the consciousness of young people through the educational system. Although President Nyerere of Tanzania provides the most eloquent and inspirational expression of this reconstructionist approach to education and work links in his policy of Education for Self-reliance, the central problem was, and still is, as Foster has so cogently argued (Foster, 1982), that young people and their families understand education individualistically as the principal route up and away from the harsh realities of rural life, not as a preparation for or a commitment to rural development. Cultural reconstruction was the pivotal aim in the policy of Education for Self-reliance, but the ‘structural’ imperatives of selection and distribution are so
intrinsic to educational systems and so dominant in the minds of rural communities, they remain stubbornly subversive of these attempts to reorientate the education/work connection (Saunders & Sambili, 1995).

**Social practice (learning through work) narrative**

These narratives shift the analytical focus from the gap or boundary between education on the one hand, and work on the other hand, to a consideration of the way learning and practice—particularly, work practice—are integrated. It is notable that this narrative strips education from the equation and uses the less aspirational concept of ‘learning’ in its stead. So it is to the way education, learning and work might be ‘integrated’ that I now turn.

Paradoxically, the new work order, which has been presented as essentially organic rather than mechanistic (Silver & Brennan, 1988), began to be increasingly associated with an education and training narrative based on the idea of units of competence (for a clear exposition of this approach see Jessop, 1991). The extent to which the competence narrative has accomplished global ascendancy is striking. This approach requires the functional analysis of jobs (within occupations) to derive elements and units of behaviour or performance that can be specified and ‘evidenced’ such that an individual is declared or certified competent at a job and be awarded a qualification.

The approach has been extensively criticized over the past ten years. Nigel Norris (1991) argues that competence-based approaches tend to reduce job competence to atomized, observable behaviours, which may not embody competence in the sense of generalizable or holistic capability, or indeed situated competence. This argument rehearses some of the issues raised above in the context of the nature of work-based learning. It suggests there is a conflation of the notion of an ‘act’ and a ‘competence’, so the charge is that such systems are behaviouristic and reductionist. As Hodkinson would have it:

> Role performance dominates, and is seen as a composite of skills, knowledge and understanding. Knowledge and understanding underpin performance and, where possible, are to be tested through it.  
>  
> (Hodkinson, 1992, p. 31)

This critique maintains that the competence approach isolates or dismembers job-related action and encourages an alienated, atomistic framework for work capability rather than holistic understanding. Unless specifically built in to redress this tendency, holistic understanding will be de-emphasized (see also Ashworth & Saxton, 1990). This argument seems particularly pertinent for pre-work vocational training in which competence approaches are being used instead of ‘education’-driven courses. These approaches find that the broader knowledge base is unspecified and experientially derived, situated knowledge is absent, potentially leaving a much-denuded structure. Saunders (1995; Saunders & Machell, 2000) argues that it may well be that vocational degree schemes linked to higher education will retain a broader knowledge component even though the logic of a competence-based approach suggests it is not needed.
While the critique of this competence narrative that suggests it embodies a reductionist concept of the nature of work practice is plausible, it is important to discern whether this critique is equally as valid in different types of work context. The danger of reductionism may be more acute at the higher levels of qualification and their associated training. Winter (1992), writing with reference to social work practices, suggests that work practice may embody complex and potentially non-routine aspects along with a wide range of associated knowledge. Further, Hager (2004) has cogently argued that while the competence notion will not deliver what it promises for policymakers, its critics have also failed to fully grasp the distinctive elements of performance, underlying elements of competence and the learning process.

What does the competence narrative imply for theories of social practice in general, and work practice in particular? In specifying job-related activity by the use of competence statements, we are asserting that for the purposes of developing the capability of a workforce, work can be understood predominantly in terms of technical rationality—i.e. a set of linearly connected components functioning together logically towards a specified end. While it is clearly the case that most jobs have a technical dimension, ‘being good at it’ involves a lot of other kinds of capabilities loosely implied by the logic of a ‘job in action’. We may find therefore that there are unintended outcomes to competence approaches. As Jones and Moore (1993) suggest, by reducing work practice to competence statements, through a process of functional analysis,

skills and behaviour are disembedded from everyday social relationships and cultural practices. Culturally embedded collective skill is replaced by an individualised, technical competency.  

(Jones & Moore 1993, p. 392).

Sue Otter reported in the early 1990s that positive responses of many of those who have been involved in work-based assessments may be more connected to feelings of well-being because their work and skill were being publicly acknowledged, but a direct improvement in work effectiveness was not necessarily a perceived outcome (Otter, 1994).

Out of the critique of competence, a meta-theory narrative has emerged based on the integration between work practice and learning. It was apparent that the idea of competence eschewed the concern with how people learned in the workplace and replaced it with what people learned in the workplace. But, as such it was guilty of a critical double-wammy, not only did it distort what people learned, it made invisible how people learned at work. So, theory narratives on the way ‘practice’ itself yields knowledge and learning have gained ground in the last decade or so. This narrative turns to a consideration of the learning process but does so by figuring the locus of concern as learning in social or organizational contexts rather than individual cognitive process.

The narrative analyses an extended notion of professional and organizational knowledge, produced and sustained through situated work practice. By integrating theory narratives that explore professional learning process (see Schon, 1991; Eraut, 1994, 2000) with those that develop the idea of ‘practice’ itself (Giddens, 1993; Lave
& Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000), with a concept of the knowledge resources (formal, explicit and technical on the one hand, and informal, tacit, social, cultural and discursive on the other hand) that are produced and accessed metaphorically as ‘rules’ (Blackler, 1995; Bereiter & Scardemalia, 1993) that frame our work behaviour, this narrative has broken new ground and provided a fertile opportunity for new research into the way learning and work intersect. It has a corpus of theory that depicts the new entrant or novice in a working environment as travelling through a cyclical journey of practice within work settings, access to existing and production of new knowledge resources, informal learning processes, the creation and use of rules (as knowledge resources) for continually evolving clusters of practices. As these cycles proceed, the novice moves from the periphery to the centre in terms of experience and expertise (see Figure 2).

The important dimension of this narrative is the way it involves a complex dynamic. This dynamic is constantly evolving as new members of a community of practice use the knowledge resources that are in place by following tacit and explicit rules, but at the same time have the potential to create and add to the knowledge base at others’ disposal. This notion is not to suggest that practice is the only source of knowledge resources, but that it has moved to centre stage in our understanding. It is clearly an evocative frame of reference, providing the theoretical base for many studies globally, in which shared or collaborative learning is the central preoccupation, in professional groups (see e.g. Hilsdon, 2004), in disciplines (see e.g. Graven, 2004) and in on-line environments (see e.g. Dewhurst et al., 2004).

Figure 2. Learning through work in a community of practice
There is, however, a one dimensionality to this narrative that theorists and researchers, essentially sympathetic to its cause, have identified through testing its efficacy as an ‘orientating’ theory in diverse settings. Of course, while seductive and helpful in directing our attention to the way in which learning and work practice can be conceptually connected, this narrative has some limitations in scope. Fuller and colleagues (Fuller et al., 2005, p. 65) identify ways in which the communities of practice notion might fall down. It cannot encompass all types of workplace learning because ‘experienced’ workers clearly continue to learn despite leaving ‘peripheral participation’ many years previously; in these cases, other types of continual informal learning is taking place. The undervaluing of more conventional ‘training’ and out-of-work learning is not helpful. Other kinds of learning contexts (see Saunders, 1998) are part of the workplace learning narrative. The idea of ‘peripheral’ or ‘novice’ status, and the way in which an enculturation process takes place in the CoP schema, make invisible the home and community identities, as well as previous work identities, and combine to make a positive contribution to a new work–learning dynamic. Finally, possibly the most important gap in the CoP idea concerns the power lacunae. The sociology of knowledge—i.e. its social location in differential power relations within the workplace is crucial in understanding the way in which certain types of knowledge and understanding might be privileged or inhibited, encouraged or prevented not on the basis of work practice knowledge, but on the basis of status and power. While a critique of Wenger’s notion of community might be that it fails to acknowledge this two-way process of knowledge creation at work, of interest to the researcher using this paradigm is the extent to which the distribution of power in an organization or a community of practice precludes or enables the novice or expert in the production and legitimation of knowledge. Knowledge then is not legitimated (becomes accepted) simply because it creates a useful new rule (or way of doing something), it might depend on who created the rule rather than what the rule was.

Boundary-crossing narratives

The final narrative returns to the idea of boundary and how it has been reconstructed to offer new perspectives on the relationships between education, learning and work. While boundary is the metaphor for the site of interest in this narrative, its preoccupation is more with the way in which boundaries require and produce learning opportunities that, in an important sense, integrate positive features of some of the other narratives, than in a simple representation of ‘transfer’. The hackneyed metaphor of ‘transfer’ does not do justice to the complex social and cognitive processes that take place as boundary crossing is undertaken (Beach, 2003, p. 39). We can say generically that when people in one social environment, be it in an educational institution or any social location, move across a boundary in time and space to another social location, either another educational institution, or in the light of the interest in this paper, from an educational environment to a place of work, then it can be depicted as a boundary-crossing process. Two dimensions are important here. First, the act of moving across boundaries yields the potential for learning
as sense-making processes and informal learning is given impetus to produce ‘ontological security’ in the new environment. There may be a need for a wide range of bridging tools to help learners and those supporting them to navigate these transitions. The term ‘bridging’ is an apt metaphor because it implies a journey and a connection between places in two senses: just as a bridge takes an individual or group from one point to another, it also joins one place to another. This narrative has a strong vision of the world learners inhabit overwhelmingly characterized by rapid change. In this sense, ‘bridging’ means:

- enabling learners to experience elements of future practice as a ‘rehearsal’.
- enabling learners to move from one kind of learning experience to another.
- enabling the facilitators of learning to innovate and change.
- enabling the learning potential of moving from one system of activity to another.
- enable learners in one activity system to work in concert with learners in another activity system towards a common ‘project’.

The term ‘bridging tool’ is guided by a specific learning theory. The idea that people engaged in change (that moving from one activity system to another, for instance, from school to work or from HE to work, involves ‘change’ is axiomatic) has resonance with the notion identified by Engestrom and others (see Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom, 2003) concerning the metaphor of ‘boundary crossing’. Conventionally associated with the experience of moving between different ‘activity systems’ and the learning processes, opportunities and, indeed, requirements that such crossing implies, activity theory has provided a fertile resource for depicting this process. Building on the work of Vygotsky (1999), Engestrom and his collaborators (1999, 2001, 2004) have drawn our attention to ways of thinking that emphasize how learning takes place in a social setting involving practices shaped by tools and resources, communities, divisions of labour and rules such that individuals and groups experience tension, creative problem-solving and resolution that utilizes these elements towards an ‘object’ or ‘project’ that provides the ‘point’ or raison d’être of the activity system as a whole.

This narrative has interesting implications. If we depict educational organizations and the workplace as different activity systems, characterized by different communities of practice, then moving from one to another involves a form of social and cognitive ‘brokerage’ in which a variety of tools might aid and develop ‘expansive’ learning opportunities. This narrative suggests that the connections between learning and work or educational institutions and work are usefully depicted as involving movement from sets of practices to others, these sets of practices having developmental histories and that bridging from one set (activity system) and another involves use of boundary objects or tools. It suggests that the metaphor of ‘transfer’ is moribund and we need to understand crossing boundaries or connections between activity systems in terms of complex ‘reconstructions’ by individuals and groups. It also sets the narrative for education learning and work connections in situated contexts with people struggling to make sense of their circumstances as they move from one set of practices to another.
Overview

So where does this discussion take us? Two of the narratives, namely the functional and the Marxist, are ‘structural theoretical’, in that they are modernist, tending to emphasize the overall patterning of trends and features of societies and offer explanations that operate at the macro or ‘whole-society’ level. They emphasize strong causal frameworks and tend to be reductive—i.e. look for explanations derived from unitary or meta-theories. To that extent, we can say they paint the big picture and do not easily translate to the explanation of specific processes or circumstances at the sub-societal level. The general conclusions are that work and education do not connect very strongly in terms of the technical dimension of the jobs people end up in, but connect quite strongly in terms of who does what job and how they might do them as social or interactional practices in the workplace. This is not good news for the policymakers because it is precisely the ‘technical match’ between education and work that has driven global educational policy for more than three decades. More problematic is the interpretation of narratives that see the education work link through what and how individuals learn. There is common ground that education connects to work through the learning process rather than through specific content—on the one hand focusing on social cohesion, and on the other hand on control.

The liberal and progressive/emancipatory narratives present both prescriptive and descriptive theoretical perspectives but frame the link between education and work from the standpoint of the aspirational aims of ‘education’. Their main focus is not on the connectedness between education and work, but more on what educational practice should be about and, de facto, its relationship with work. The unit of concern tends to be with the experience of the individual and how that might impact on curricular designs rather than whole societies. The imperative therefore comes from the drive to provide a rationale for action in the educational domain rather than explanatory theory. Of course, the nature of the individual as a worker, citizen, parent, etc. is a large part of the consideration of these perspectives. The belief is that a ‘proper’ education will result axiomatically in individual effectiveness within these roles. The connectedness to work in these perspectives is not explicit, but is addressed incidentally alongside connections to other aspects of the learner’s lives. Explicit connections with work through the learning process and by the pedagogic actions of teachers is not precluded and is explicitly encouraged in some versions of this narrative.

The last two narratives draw on very different traditions. They are not structural theories, although there is a structural dimension to their epistemology. They focus primarily on the ‘situation’ or ‘context’ of practices that embody a work–learning connection. They are both analytically descriptive and offer prescriptions, particularly the ‘boundary-crossing’ perspective, which owes something to a ‘Deweyian’ approach. The unit of consideration is the ‘individual’ and what we might call ‘social cognition’, and the nature of this consideration emphasizes the social location of practices or practice clusters. Their theoretical narratives have, to some extent, filtered out the traditional ambitions of ‘education’ and replaced them by analogous notions of transformative, expansive or emancipatory learning. Their narratives tend
to emphasize the learning process, the connections between learning and practices and the integration of learning and working, particularly although not exclusively, in the context of the development of collaborations, and networks, change processes and the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies. They connect to issues of power in a very uncertain way. They imply a social world that is relatively ‘flat’ in terms of power distribution, held more on the basis of access to knowledge rather than material resources. This results in a highly fluid picture where it is hard to predict where power might reside and in what direction it might flow.

The presence of ‘work’ in the educational policy domain is also apparent through the various attempts to promote the interests and awareness of ‘industry’ by encouraging local employers’ participation in governance, sponsorship and partnership arrangements with educational institutions. These trends, embodied in complex policy instruments like Excellence Clusters and the current City Academies in the UK, are cases in point. Here the concept of learning through such partnerships between educational and other organizations might be better understood by reference to communities of practices and activity theory.

The theory narratives outlined in this paper can be captured graphically (see Table I) where their characteristics are tabulated in terms of their epistemological assumptions, the position of individual agency (essentially differences between narratives that have structural or personal learning references), what each narrative suggests about the learning process, the implications for the learner’s connection with work, the analytical focus for the narrative and, finally, the way the narrative is likely to evolve in the future.

There is a need to distinguish between the implications of these narratives for circumstances pertaining to the UK, for example, on the one hand, and those where access to any educational resource is a luxury only some of the population can enjoy. The following observations are tempered by this ‘truth’ and focus, in particular, on conditions in the so-called ‘advanced economies’.

An RSA report by Valerie Bayliss (1988) suggests there is consensus that a shift has occurred in the structure of work of advanced economies towards the provision of services and the production, management and circulation of knowledge, particularly through the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). The power of these technologies to transform knowledge circulation and the rapid growth of their use within education, the workplace and the home, problematizes the narratives on education and work links outlined in Figure 3. The traditional narratives are based on a view that education/learning, family, community, work, etc. happen in different places, at different times, with different people—i.e. spatially, temporally and, in terms of ‘practice’, logically distinct.

However, the power and potential of the new information technologies (WWW, electronic and video mailing and conferencing technologies, multi-media learning and information resources, personal electronic devices, mobile technologies, etc.) lie in their capacity to radically reconstruct and integrate work, education, community and family practices. In the light of these changes, the emerging narratives concerning integration between education and work and the potential for transformative learning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory narrative</th>
<th>Epistemological assumptions about education</th>
<th>Individual agency</th>
<th>Learning process</th>
<th>Implications for work people</th>
<th>Analytical focus</th>
<th>Futures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functionalist</strong></td>
<td>Education functions as a contribution to system maintenance and social order and is derived from technical and social need</td>
<td>Under-emphasized</td>
<td>Teacher led, correspondence curriculum</td>
<td>Prepares learners for work</td>
<td>Functional requirements for workplace</td>
<td>Increased integration between employment needs and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marxist</strong></td>
<td>Education enables ruling interests in societies to maintain social control</td>
<td>Under-emphasized</td>
<td>Teacher led, correspondence curriculum</td>
<td>Prepares learners for work</td>
<td>Hegemonic socialization process and control</td>
<td>Control increasingly exercised through access, funding and cultural reproduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal</strong></td>
<td>Education practice inducts individuals into universalistic forms of knowledge</td>
<td>Emphasized</td>
<td>Teacher led through forms of knowledge</td>
<td>Produces educated citizens for life including work</td>
<td>Forms of knowledge</td>
<td>Embattled as functionalist hegemony becomes still more dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Progressive (learning)</strong></td>
<td>Education centres on requirements derived from personal needs and preferences</td>
<td>Emphasized</td>
<td>Learner led, formal, through personal experience and inclination</td>
<td>Produces ‘autonomous’ workers</td>
<td>The nature of learner-centredness, learning strategies</td>
<td>Site for development moves to HE as a form of consumerism, radical learning process for disadvantaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Progressive (emancipatory)</strong></td>
<td>Education is concerned with building better societies through active learning processes of individuals</td>
<td>Emphasized</td>
<td>Learner led, formal, curriculum based and social reconstructionist needs</td>
<td>Produces responsible workers</td>
<td>Contribution of social curriculum to society building</td>
<td>Citizenship programmes and diversified curriculum for developing countries</td>
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Table I. (Continued)

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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social practice</strong></td>
<td>Education is eclipsed by a focus on the learning process through social practice</td>
<td>Under-emphasized</td>
<td>Through practice, context led, informal, based on knowledge resources required through work practices</td>
<td>Produces inducted 'workers'</td>
<td>Informal learning process through work practice, novice to expert</td>
<td>Becomes increasingly more important as work-based learning solutions are sought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boundary crossing</strong></td>
<td>Education is eclipsed by a focus on context of learning as individuals and groups move from one activity system to another or one period to another</td>
<td>Emphasized</td>
<td>Context led, orchestrated, boundary objects based on knowledge resources of activity systems</td>
<td>Produces effective problem-solvers</td>
<td>Learning opportunities and mechanisms between activity systems</td>
<td>Becomes more important as complexity and change become the new status quo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
through activities and practice communities suggest a seventh perspective on education and work which integrates aspects of the existing narratives.

Work becomes a powerful site for educational processes and activities (Young, 1990). As Howieson and others (1997) suggest, within this frame a range of associations, partnerships and collaborations between schools and work practices outside schools, aided by ICTs, become possible. This integrative orientation is evident in the discourse of contemporary UK policy and EU initiatives, which encourage partnership approaches for the provision of learning opportunities which focus on employment and on education to which we refer above.

Narratives that emphasize structural dimensions accurately identify the way in which educational experience is part of the process by which societies sustain differentiation between groups and individuals by distributing them socially, culturally and economically. They suggest that the distributive efficacy of education lies in social and cultural rather than technical outcomes. They also suggest the way policy-makers and employers confuse these two effects, but pupils and their families rarely do. However, more recent ‘post-structural’ theory, like those reviewed by Rudd (1997), indicate the re-emergence of individual agency, choice and risk balancing in theorizing education and work connections. In addition, as suggested above, the ICT revolution has brought about the mediation of the structural imperatives, suggesting much wider and unpredictable implications for the way people experience the education–work connection.

These tensions are born out throughout the educational systems but are usefully illustrated by reference to the higher education system. Some have argued (Barnett, 2003) that there is a developing crisis of confidence in academic or scholarly practice in general higher education as sufficient preparation for the rapidly evolving new work order. It is here that a form of neo-correspondence is emerging. Aided by ICTs, education is being redefined as learning. At first sight, this redefinition is in danger of stripping away education’s higher emancipatory or civilizing goals and being reconstructed as a technical fix. Learning at work and work itself become integrated activities, as it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between projects, planning, information handling and evaluation, quality or learning circles. Higher education is often called upon to validate learning in this new environment and asked to provide a qualification framework. At the moment, this requires the reconstruction and production of the learning experience in such a way that it displays ‘academic’ characteristics or meets higher education aims. Higher education is struggling to determine precisely what these might be in an environment in which intellectual endeavour is increasingly unconfined to the physical space and institutional practices of educational institutions. Knowledge production, circulation and use is no longer the preserve of the educational or dedicated research institution (Barnett, 1994, p. 200).

The example of higher education in the UK suggests a possible long-term future in which learning processes, often embodied in ideas such as partnership, network and loosely coupled systems, are the focus rather than education. We can speculate on a future narrative in which education becomes increasingly de-institutionalized, the physical institutions of learning cease to be as socially important. Learning opportunities become freely and easily available to most individuals and groups via ICTs in,
for example, the home, community and work-based learning centres in which boundaries are crossed forming new communities of practice. A new discourse of *virtuality* is being created for communities, networks and collaborative knowledge production. The structurally derived social, cultural and economic power of differences between educational institutions begins to diminish. If these trends continue, it might be the way the socially excluded can seize opportunities for knowledge use. In this scenario, the way individual and group identities are presently constructed, defined and sustained by their educational experience is transformed.

Learning will be integrated into a much wider range of practices, including work. Ivan Illich’s (1973) 30-year-old vision of a deschooled society becomes a possibility. If learning is no longer in the hands of providers, but learners, then its emancipatory (educational) potential lies not only in content and process, but also in open accessibility and use. This perspective might sound naïve but it is not. It acknowledges that learning processes will not challenge power directly, but that education or learning will gradually cease to be the site on which social and cultural disadvantages are centred.

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Theory narratives of education, learning and work


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Theory narratives of education, learning and work


