

Review of the 9th International Conference on Researching Work and Learning

This is a personal reflection upon the Researching Work and Learning (RWL) conference held in Singapore on the 9th to the 11th of December 2015. The RWL conference was established in 1999 and is the leading international research conference series in the field of work and learning. The aim of the conference is to provide “a critical platform for researchers and professionals to share research in work and learning, engage in dialogue with colleagues and experts from around the world, and deepen their knowledge in the areas of work and learning”.

The theme of the conference was “Work and Learning in the Era of Globalisation: Challenges for the 21st Century”. The conference was immaculately organised and hosted by The Institute for Adult Learning, The National Institute of Education and SIM University, Singapore.

The call for conference papers identified the following key questions:

- How does globalisation mediate skills, performance and work?
- What are the implications of the changing nature of work for learning through work?
- In what ways can vocational education and training policies and systems be responsive to the changing nature of work and global and regional pressures?

And was intended to be of relevance to:

- academics;
- researchers and study teams;
- human resource development professionals;
- adult educational consultants and training providers;
- adult educators and trainers;
- workforce development specialists and policy makers; and
- anyone else interested in work and learning.

A large international audience explored the conference themes through a rich and intensive programme of plenary key notes, parallel sessions and posters. With some hundred and eighteen conference contributions on offer it was not possible to sample more than a handful of the high quality sessions available. My report focuses upon the sessions I was able to attend and which made a particular impact upon me.

The conference got off to a thought provoking start. Emeritus Professor Raewyn Connell was the opening keynote speaker who drew upon her southern theory work to draw the attention of delegates to some of the complex and sometimes subtle differences between “Northern” (Europe and North America) and “Southern” (Asia and the southern hemisphere) ways of theorising or viewing the world. It is always good to have your world view

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challenged and I found it a timely reminder of the multiple perspectives that can and should be brought to bear upon workplace learning both globally and locally.

Ramon Wenzel of the University of Western Australia led a challenging and interactive session putting forward a framework for the research of work and learning. This stimulated me to reflect upon the breadth and diversity of the field and the attractiveness of developing common recognition and understanding of at least the broad parameters of the field.

The full paper is available at: www.rwl2015.com/abstracts-01.html

Julie Reddy and Heidi Bolton of the South African Qualifications Authority drew upon their personal experiences of introducing and supporting colleagues within the South African Qualification Authority to implement change using an action research approach. I was initially attracted to this session by the use of action research and their account of the strengths and pitfalls of the approach both reinforced my appreciation of the action research approach but also further strengthened my conviction in the advantage of the work-applied learning approach which enables action research to reach further into organisations by linking it with real life work teams supported as action learning sets.

The full paper is available at: www.rwl2015.com/abstracts-02.html

David Boud of Deakin University and Donna Rooney of the University of Technology Sydney examined early studies to shed light upon the conditions for “learning conducive work”. This was of particular interest to me as it is a key element in work-based learning and core to the potential to combine individual learning with the attainment of organisational objectives. The focus was upon informal learning and built upon earlier studies in Europe and Australia which introduced the notion of learning-conducive work and the role of organisational context. The more recent role of practice theory was also identified and examined. The presentation was stimulating and I was very taken with the notion of a meta-analysis of the considerable number of papers now available on informal work. I look forward to the next stage in this work.

The full paper is available at: www.rwl2015.com/abstracts-05.html

An important part of my rationale for attending the conference was to present on behalf of the Australian Institute of Business (AIB) with Carol Costley of Middlesex University a paper which was also jointly authored with Selva and Param Abraham of AIB. The paper we presented took a comparative case study approach to identify and examine the features of higher education infrastructure needed in order to support learning through work as part of a course leading to a higher education qualification. The cases chosen were the AIB and Middlesex University, UK These institutions were chosen as they both have large numbers of students engaged in learning through work but were of different types (private and public) operating in different countries (Australia and the UK). The comparison of the two cases highlighted significant structural capital issues relating to the curriculum offer and how it was delivered and supported both academically and administratively. The focus upon implementation of programmes designed to provide learning through work seemed to be of great interest and left me wondering about the extent to which there was a theory and practice divide between the various conference contributions.

The full paper is available at: www.rwl2015.com/abstracts-04.html

The above is a very personal snapshot of what was available at the conference and I hope it might serve to inspire the reader to check out the 10th International Conference on RWL to be held in South Africa in 2017.

To find out more please see: <http://greenskills.co.za/rwl-conference-comes-to-sa/>

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