



What Did You Learn In The Real World Today?: The Case of Practicum In University Educations

Henriksen, Lars Bo, ed.
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Book Review

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Henriksen's edited volume, *What Did You Learn in the Real World Today*, is a collection of sophisticated and philosophically-grounded essays that shift pedagogical foci from how we teach to "what is learned" and "how is it learned" (18). The dense essays are divided into three sections. First is knowledge, learning and practice; next is the role a student's body plays in learning and constructing new knowledge; finally, there is problem-based learning (PBL) and practicum. The Danish Aalborg University Press funded and published the project and the specific case studies (five of the eleven chapters) do reflect a public Norwegian graduate engineering program. That said, the essays, particularly in the first and second sections, have much wider relevance for re-thinking teaching practices in any discipline from the perspective of learning. They convincingly argue that applied understanding "in the real world" generates new knowledge that beneficially challenges and reshapes the theory and tradition we teach in our classrooms.

It seems odd that a book promoting practicums and problem based learning is so thoroughly steeped in philosophical theory. But this is precisely the point. The essays here challenge the presumed "theory-practice dichotomy" (for example 23, 35, 53-4) by engaging the philosophical discussions of Aristotle, Dewey, Gadamer, Freire, and Bourdieu with case studies on practicums. The discussions of "*techne*, *epistemi*, *poiein*," and so forth, break open the categories of "knowledge" and "learning" in fruitful ways (28-9). Student activity thus mediates thinking and being (40). The authors advocate for problem-based learning (53) that engages each student in a dialectic of dynamic knowing and doing rather than a direct transfer of static knowledge (what my students call "regurgitation") through the "banking model" (54). This is a post-modern, and even a post-rationalist (chapter 4), exploration of learning. By challenging

the primacy of theory over practice, of thinking over doing, these essays seek to integrate the whole student into the learning process (such as “Embodiment as the Existential Soil of Practice” by Thøgersen, 69-80). Indeed, the concept of learning as transformation is palpable across all of the essays (5, 23) and includes aesthetic and ethical dimensions of learning (58-8). This is helpful thinking for Liberal Arts institutions that will appreciate the argument for how and what students learn as grounded in the moral aspects of *techne* and *phronesis* rather than the more abstracted (from “real life”) episteme (60-1).

Henriksen introduces the project in chapter 1 and alternates between philosophical theory in one chapter and concrete case studies in the next. Chapters 2 (on “epistemology, learning, and practice” and 3 (“the logic of practice”) are the philosophical grounding for Henriksen’s case study on an engineering practicum in chapter 4. Learning is not absorption and “reproduction,” but is instead the “production” of knowledge that comes through the engaged learning of the practicum (19). Chapter 5 then lays the next philosophical groundwork (what is the role of the physical body in learning) for the case study in chapter 6 that examines body language and spatial relationships in medical consultations to evaluate the use of electronic health records in Danish hospitals. More technology renders the physical presence of the patient irrelevant. Chapter 7, perhaps the weakest chapter, connects Dewey’s “process of inquiry” with Gadamer’s “hermeneutics” to describe how a student locates herself in a professional (“swampy”) context and negotiates solutions using both practical and theoretical tools. Chapter 8 offers support for this solution in the “real-world-on-campus” case study from the Aalborg Problem Based Learning model. Chapters 9 and 10 respectively evaluate PBL by analyzing student “employability,” the role of the university engaged in the world, and the success of Aalborg’s PBL model in multiple European contexts. Further integration and incorporation of the practicum into university curricula demands a dialectical conversation between case studies in the field, classrooms, and campuses so that theory and practice are mutually reshaping one another.

In the final analysis, *What Did You Learn in the Real World* requires effort, not only to appreciate the threads of the philosophical conversations, or the (mostly) northern European educational contexts, but also because the English phrasing is rough and not intuitive for native speakers. That said, although Scandinavian engineering programs are quite remote from U.S. seminaries or even undergraduate Liberal Arts institutions, the bulk of these essays open fascinating conversations about learning, knowledge, and engagement of the whole person – student and teacher (à la Freire) – in both study and practice. In other words, the deep wrestling with antecedent philosophers and pedagogues to articulate what students learn in practicum and how students learn it has much to offer our collective thinking about engaged learning in diverse institutional contexts. It becomes quite clear that “how we learn” does and

will have consequences for what we learn, and especially for how we construct knowledge.

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